

WRITTEN BY
Kumanano

ILLUSTRATED BY
029

5
novel

A large, fluffy white bear is shown from the chest up, hugging a young girl with long green hair and red eyes. The bear has red eyes and a red collar with a black bell. The girl is looking up at the bear with a surprised expression. The background is a light green with some paw prints.

KUMA KUMA KUMA BEAR

VISIT...

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Skills

► Yuna's Status_

► FANTASY WORLD LANGUAGE

The fantasy world's language will sound like Japanese.

Spoken words are conveyed to the other party in the fantasy world language.

► FANTASY WORLD LITERACY

The ability to read the fantasy world writing.
Written words become the fantasy world's words.

► BEAR EXTRADIMENSIONAL STORAGE

The white bear's mouth opens into infinite space. It can hold (eat) anything.

However, it cannot hold (eat) living things.
Time will stop for objects that are inside of it.
Anything that is put into the extradimensional storage can be pulled out at any time.

► BEAR IDENTIFICATION

By looking through the bear eyes on the Bear Clothes' hood, one can see the effects of a weapon or tool.
Doesn't work without wearing the hood.

► BEAR DETECTION

Using the wild abilities of bears, can detect monsters or people.

► BEAR MAP

Any area looked at by the bear eyes can be made into a map.

► BEAR SUMMONING

Bears can be summoned from the bear gloves.
A black bear can be summoned from the black glove.
A white bear can be summoned from the white glove.

► BEAR TRANSPORTER GATE

By setting up a gate, can move between gates.
When more than three gates are in place, can travel to a location by picturing it.
This gate can only be opened with the bear hand.

► BEAR PHONE

Can have long-distance conversations with others.
Phone persists until caster dispels it. Physically indestructible.
Can call people a bear phone is given to by picturing the person.
Incoming call is announced by the sound of a bear's cry.

Magic

► BEAR LIGHT

Mana collected in the bear glove creates a light in the shape of a bear.

► BEAR PHYSICAL ENHANCEMENT

Routing mana through the bear gear allows for physical enhancement.

► BEAR FIRE MAGIC

Based on the mana that is gathered in the bear glove, gives the ability to use fire elemental magic.
Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.
When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR WATER MAGIC

Based on the mana that is gathered in the bear glove, gives the ability to use water elemental magic.
Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.
When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR WIND MAGIC

Based on the mana that is gathered in the bear glove, gives the ability to use wind elemental magic.
Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.
When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

► BEAR EARTH MAGIC

Based on the mana that is gathered in the bear glove, gives the ability to use earth elemental magic.
Power is proportional to mana and the mental image.
When imagining a bear, power increases even more.

Equipment

► **BLACK BEAR GLOVE (NONTRANSFERABLE)**

Attack glove, increases power based on the user's level.

► **WHITE BEAR GLOVE (NONTRANSFERABLE)**

Defense glove, increases defense based on the user's level.

► **BLACK BEAR SHOE (NONTRANSFERABLE)**

► **WHITE BEAR SHOE (NONTRANSFERABLE)**

Increases speed based on the user's level.

Prevents fatigue when walking long distances based on the user's level.

► **BLACK AND WHITE BEAR CLOTHES (NONTRANSFERABLE)**

Appears to be a onesie. Reversible.

FRONT: BLACK BEAR CLOTHES

Increases physical and magic resistance based on the user's level.

Gives heat and cold resistance.

REVERSE: WHITE BEAR CLOTHES

Automatically restores health and mana while worn.

Amount and speed based on the user's level.

Gives heat and cold resistance.

► **BEAR UNDERWEAR (NONTRANSFERABLE)**

Won't get dirty no matter how much they're used.

An excellent item that won't retain sweat or smells.

Will grow with the user.

**KUMA
KUMA
KUMA
BEAR**

Chapter 96:

The Bear Makes a Tunnel

A DAY AFTER the big, post-kraken killing celebration, Mileela seaport started its slow return to normalcy. The road that the robbers had blocked opened back up, and the kraken's death made the sea safer, too. Things would return to normal soon enough, Deigha told me.

Of course, Deigha *was* getting a talking-to from his daughter Anz for getting roaring drunk during the celebration, but the gloom that hung over them for days vanished. They were downright cheerful, honestly.

"Ms. Yuna, are you fine with having rice for breakfast too?"

"You know it."

As if I could say no to rice. She grilled up some fish for me and fried some of the eggs I brought, and we were off to the races.

With my morning meal out of the way, I was halfway back to my room when I remembered what Anz told me just yesterday: if Crimonia were closer, she'd like to visit.

Fine by me: one way or another, I wanted to get Anz to Crimonia about as much as she did. Then again, even if I took Anz with me on the bears, I wouldn't have that steady stream of seafood. What would be the point *then*, you know? No, I'd need to secure a distribution channel for the seafood. The only half-reasonable way to get to Crimonia was via the super scenic coastline, unless you wanted to take the super—*deadly* mountain route. Either way cost you a lot of time and put you in danger ranging from *maybe-not-worth-it* to *frozen-dead-mountain-inhabitant*. Not great for seafood transportation, is what I'm saying.

To take Anz with me and get my scrumptious seafood on the reg, there'd need to be an easy way for people to come and go between Crimonia and

Mileela. Only one idea fit the bill: a tunnel in the mountain range between the two towns.

Boom: problem solved. Less time to get to Crimonia, Anz could come with me easily, and we'd guarantee a continuous source of seafood. With a little bear magic, we could be all set...well, *maybe*.

I mean, you can't just make a tunnel by digging.

Consider elevation differences. If I start digging horizontally from this side, I might just end up coming out partway through the mountains...or dig too deep and wind up underground forever. No, I couldn't make the tunnel without an idea of the elevation difference between the two points. I opened up my map so I could check how far away I was, but...

"Hm?"

...the map looked a little different?

The old 2D map was full 3D now. I could even see the elevation changes by fiddling around with it. Maybe it'd gotten a software upgrade from...defeating... the kraken? Okay, great—did I get anything else? I checked my other skills, but nope.

I studied that map skill again.

Bear Map Ver. 2.0

Any area seen by the bear 痴 eyes can be made into a map.

Version 2.0, huh? Not a *huge* upgrade, but pretty nice to have if you, say, want to use magical bears to carve a tunnel through a mountain.

I turned my eyes to the map again. It really showed just how tall the mountain range was, and how completely wild it was that Yuula tried to scale it. No way I'd even have attempted it without my bears.

I pinpointed Crimonia and Mileela on the map, and then searched for a good spot to make the tunnel. The goods would need to be transported by carriage,

so it'd be better if I put it close to a road. And oh, I should keep the elevation difference as even as possible while *also* keeping it close to both towns, too—lower the burden on the carriages, right? Take *that* into account, don't forget this, aaaaand...

I'd just marked my two spots when there was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's Sei. Is now a good time, Ms. Yuna?"

Sei, from the adventurers' guild? Kind of odd for him to visit the inn. I decided to open the door and hear him out.

"Please excuse me for disturbing your rest. The guild master is calling for you, so would you be kind enough to come with me to see her?"

"What does she want?"

"She would like to consult with you about the seaport. I know little beyond this—you would have to ask her for elaboration."

About the seaport? Huh. Well *now* I was curious, so I headed on over to the adventurers' guild. Once there, the employees guided me into a room in the back where Atola, old man Kuro, and two old guys I didn't recognize were waiting.

Weird.

"We were waiting for you, Yuna. Thank you for coming. For now, find yourself a seat," said Atola.

"Umm, what is this about?" I asked while sitting down in the closest chair.

"We just had a little favor to ask you for."

"A favor?" Just a wee bit ominous, don't you think?

"We were hoping you could serve as an intermediary between the seaport and Crimonia's lord."

"An intermediary?"

"Our mayor ran out on us. Then there was that scandal with the trade guild, and all the while, that kraken splashed around, ruining us day by day. It feels

like a streak of bad luck, doesn't it? Well, I'm tired of it. We'd like to speak with the lord of Crimonia as soon as possible."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Bluntly put, we're thinking of affiliating Mileela with Crimonia."

"You're talking about merging with another country?"

Atola nodded.

"Seems pretty serious," I said. "Do the other townspeople know?"

"They do not," said old man Kuro, "but we can deal with any fallout ourselves."

"The only ones who know are the people gathered here," said Atola. "Think of us as a sort of council. Maybe a little small for a council, sure, but two of us just ran away."

"Leaving just us to make the decision," continued old man Kuro. "And our decision was to affiliate ourselves with another country. We do not believe we can continue on as we are, not if we are considering the future of our village and its children."

"After that, we got into talking about which town we should affiliate with and whether your home of Crimonia would work."

"Okay, but *why* Crimonia? You've got other towns you trade with, right? Surely some of them are closer."

One of the older men, quiet until now, spoke up in a bitter, dry grumble: "We can't say much about their countries, but the lords of those towns are a pack of greedy jackals. Before the robbers appeared, we asked those towns to deal with the kraken. They agreed...and demanded fortunes upon fortunes for the kindness." The other old men nodded along next to him.

"By all rights, we should have put a stop to the trade guild's corruption earlier, but we were told that the guild was trying to produce the funds for those awful lords, and so we could do nothing. If that lord had not demanded such a vast sum of money, Zallad from the trade guild might not have done what he did."

“We might be equally to blame for this.” The three old men hung their heads.

Right, that made sense; I wondered why old man Kuro followed the trade guild’s instructions. I guess if Zallad told him they were raising funds to get rid of the kraken and the robbers, it would’ve made perfect sense for him to bow his head.

“Now, then, Yuna,” said Atola, “do you know what kind of person the lord of Crimonia is?”

“The *lord*?” Weird hearing them call Cliff something as dramatic as “the lord.” “He’s all right. I haven’t heard anyone say he’s a moneygrubber.” That is, as far as I knew, but who could say?

“Hm. For the time being, then, we’d like you to negotiate with Crimonia’s lord. If your audience goes well, we may just try to establish an alliance with him. Can we count on you?”

“I’ll make an effort, but I can’t guarantee anything.”

“We don’t need guarantees. Any effort from the likes of you is more than enough. Can you do this for us?” The elders bowed their heads at her words.

“If it’s just talking,” I said, “I’ll give it a shot. Sorry in advance if I blow it, though.”

“Even giving it a try is more than enough,” said one of the old men. “Please give this to the lord of Crimonia. The details are written down there.”

“All right, I’ll head out tomorrow morning,” I said, and took the letter from the old man. If I was going to be heading out, better to do it first thing. “And oh, don’t forget about the land thing.” In return for defeating the kraken, I was supposed to get a plot of land where I could build a house.

“We’ll make arrangements for that by the time you return.”

“A good location, please.” Ah, I could just picture it now: a bed and breakfast (and bear) house on top of a slight hill. Perfect.

I headed back to the inn and let Deigha and Anz know that I was going back to Crimonia.

“You’re going home already?” asked Anz.

“Couldn’t you enjoy yourself here for a little longer, Ms. Yuna? You’ve hardly had time to see what our town is *like* without that kraken. I’d like you to try some of our good cooking.”

“Yeah,” said Anz with a sharp nod, “I was hoping to whip you up something tasty now that we can go fishing again.”

Anz and Deigha looked disappointed, but their gloom had nothing on me: I was the one who was going to miss all those tasty meals. In a way, that pretty much made me a martyr. “I’ll come back right away, so you’ll have to cook stuff up for me to eat then.”

“Right away?”

“Yeah, Atola asked me for a quick favor. I just have to pop over to Crimonia, but I’ll come back right away.”

“In that case, what should we do with your rice? Should we hold onto it for you?”

“No, I’ll take that with me.” With my bear storage, it was no problem.

They led me to the kitchen storehouse where they kept their barrel filled to the brim with delicious, mouth-watering rice. “Can I, err...can I really have *all* of it?” So much rice. And sure, the ocean was free for trade again, but the reality was that they were still dealing with a food shortage.

“All of the townspeople brought this for you, miss. It’s all yours. Don’t mind us, just take it.”

I gratefully put the rice—the entire, practically brimming barrel—into my bear storage. I wouldn’t have to worry about running out of rice for a long, long while.

The next day, after thanking Deigha once again, I left the inn.

Up until I left the seaport, the townspeople were quick to greet me the moment they saw me. I’d give them a little wave with my bear puppet, but I had business to take care of. Once I was out of town, I summoned Kumayuru,

hopped on, and pulled up my map. Let's see, where was that first spot I marked?

We ran along the seacoast road, and the surroundings turned to forest. I'd deal with the trees around here later. For now, I had a date with a dig site.

One more check to confirm, and yep. Crimonia's direction was right. It'd be fine if I started digging the tunnel here.

Next, I made an impromptu changing room with earth magic and changed into my white bear outfit. Sure, nobody was around, but *what if someone was*? No thanks, I'm not that level of gutsy.

Why the white bear clothes? Well, I'd be using oodles of magic. I really wanted to avoid collapsing from mana exhaustion like I had with the kraken. Mana recovery went a whole lot faster in white bear mode, and I wasn't about to sleep for a few days in a row like after the kraken battle.

After my costume change, I stood in front of the spot where the tunnel entrance was soon to be and got right into it. I carved the tunnel big enough that a slightly larger-than-average carriage could clear it like...*that*. Was that size about right? I eyeballed it. Seemed okay. With that down, all I needed to do was dig. Since it was dark inside, I made a bear light to brighten things up.

I dug as I walked, compressing the walls as I went to harden them and keep them from collapsing. I smoothed out the floor, too, so it wasn't uneven. Ugh, this was a lot more of a pain than I expected—the digging part was fine, but then there was all that safety standard stuff.

Fortunately, I wasn't using up too much mana thanks to the white bear clothes. After a few rounds of crunching and carving, it wasn't as hard. I could practically go on autopilot.

The mundane work still made me a little drowsy, but I kept digging and fortifying, digging and fortifying...and then stopping, every now and then, to recheck my direction and elevation. Messing that up would be *such* a pain in the butt. I needed to make sure the slope was gentle, too, or it'd be difficult for the carriages to go through the tunnel.

About halfway through, I downed the rice balls Deigha made for me to fill me up, which wasn't the brightest idea I ever had. Having a full belly made me drowsy, so I started humming to ward off my sleepiness. Digging, digging, digging...until, several hours later, the tunnel finally opened up. When I checked the map, I confirmed I was on the other side of the mountains.

I was finally out...in the dark. Huh? Despite my bear light, it was pitch black and gloomy. Above me, faint starlight peeked through gaps in the trees. I dug steadily from morning to night. No wonder I yawned up a storm. The moment I realized it was night, all the day's drowsiness rushed right over me.

I took my traveling bear house out in front of the tunnel. Before going inside, I checked to see if I was dirty, but nope: despite my little stint as a burrowing mole-bear, my white bear clothes were pristine. My gear was as OP as ever.

After stepping inside, I powered through the drowsiness to take a bath before slipping into bed. I summoned my bears in their cub forms as guards.

"Kumayuru, Kumakyu, goodnight."

And I was out like a light.

Chapter 97:

The Bear Goes to Meet Cliff

AFTER BATHING, relaxing after the (mental) exhaustion of burrowing through a mountain range, and going to bed a little early, I woke up to the faint rays of sunshine. I wasn't tired in the slightest. After a light breakfast, I resummoned Kumakyu, who I'd sent away earlier, and left for Crimonia. I had Kumakyu rush it, so it didn't take us long at all. I greeted the gate guards, headed into town, and sent my bear home to chill.

Before I let Fina and Tiermina know that I was back, I went to get that favor out of the way. I got to the lord's estate, told a gatekeeper I knew that I came to meet with Cliff, and before you could say "ugh, this guy again," I was led to a room right away to meet him.

Not very busy for a lord, was he?

"Not often that you're here for me instead of Noa," said Cliff.

"Well, someone asked me for a favor."

"A favor?"

I handed Cliff the letter from Mileela. Cliff took it and looked it over on the spot. When he finished reading the letter, he sighed.

"I swear, you—" He rubbed his temples. "Really, Yuna? Going after a kraken alone?"

"Does it say that I soloed it in there?" And hadn't Atola sworn everyone to secrecy?

"It says a single adventurer defeated it, and...Yuna? I happen to know you." He sighed.

Okay, fair enough, considering he knew I defeated ten thousand monsters and a black viper. But couldn't old man Kuro have made it a little less obvious?

Weaved a bit of a tale?

“It’s not like I slayed the thing for fun. The kraken just so happened to be right in my path.” I put my hands on my hips and sniffed. “It was getting in my way.”

(My way to some nutritious and oh-so-delicious rice, that was. The kraken was unlucky enough to be standing in the way, or...swimming in the way, maybe.)

“It was in *your way*? You really need to listen to yourself sometime. You sound like a villainous overlord trying to take over the world, or something.”

“World domination would be a total pain.”

Cliff blinked. “Wait, you’re not saying...you *couldn’t* do it, then.”

“I mean?” I shrugged. “I guess I’m not?”

But it wasn’t like I was going to, you know? What was so fun about world domination? Sure, you *could* take over the world...or you could nap and snack and be a person for a while. I read all the light novels about getting reincarnated in another world—usually after some big car or whatever whacked ‘em dead and some fantasy stuff happened—and becoming a hero or a demon king or some crazy half-naked barbarian. You know what that was, though? Work. This bear would rather hibernate, thank you very much.

“Well,” said Cliff, clearing his throat, “I suppose the contents of the letter are more important than you, at present.”

“What was in the letter?” I more or less knew what they put in it, but I didn’t know the nitty-gritty details.

“In short, they’ve detailed the events of the past month and have said they are willing to pay taxes in order to join Crimonia’s territory. There are, ah, a lot of tells about what *you’ve* been up to,” he added with a distant look in his eyes.

“Tells?”

“It *tells* of a single adventurer saving them by donating food. It tells of a single adventurer joining with four other adventurers to defeat bandits and rescue hostages. Oh, and another unnamed single adventurer defeated the kraken, which saved them from their food shortage. Don’t worry, no names, just...a

single adventurer.”

I guess people who didn’t know me wouldn’t make assumptions from that letter. Then again, Atola and old man Kuro didn’t really know how well Cliff knew me, so I guess this was just inevitable.

“Ah, putting aside the parts about you being an impossibly powerful teenage girl, the problem at hand is how we’ll progress with these negotiations. I’ll probably need to meet with them, but they don’t have a mayor. Just three elders representing the seaport, with the master of the adventurers’ guild assisting them. Summoning older folks all the way here seems rather cruel.”

“You’re not busy though, right? Why don’t you just go out to Mileela?”

“Not bu—listen you, I’m still a lord! I have plenty of work! I can’t just leave the town unattended for multiple days.”

“If you just want to get to Mileela, it’ll only take a day.”

Cliff gave me an odd look. “Oh dear. Are you—are you feeling all right? You’ve traveled a while, and I know that hard journeys can take their toll, so if you need a doctor—”

“If you’re saying I’m delirious, I’m not!”

“You say that, but surely you know that there’s no way getting to Mileela in so little time. The mountains? Surely you recall the mountains. Unless you suggest that we fly, of course.” Cliff gave his arms a little flap to demonstrate. Man, really?

“I can’t fly,” I said, trying not to grit my teeth, “but I *did* make a tunnel.”

“Wait,” said Cliff mid-flap, a perfectly dumbfounded look crossing his face. Now *that* was a sight. No way Noa would be able to take him seriously if she saw that one. “My apologies. Could you repeat that again? I think I misheard you.”

“I dug a tunnel, and now we can get there on Kumayuru in a single day.”

Cliff clutched his head. “You’re not...*lying* are you? I suppose this is, ah...I suppose this isn’t impossible? Not with you. A tunnel. In the mountains. Within a couple of...just a *couple*...of days.”

Just one, actually, but I bit my tongue.

“A tunnel?” said Cliff. “A *tunnel*, though?”

“A tunnel. I wanted to make a seafood distribution channel.” And I wanted Anz to come to Crimonia, but he didn’t need to hear that part.

“A tunnel,” sighed Cliff with the finality of a funeral. “I’ve always thought your very existence was absurd, but every conversation we have makes it worse.”



“Yep, cool, great. Anyway, we can hop on Kumayuru and get there in a single day. The other option’s to get the old guys to come here, but they’d probably need to go by carriage and it’d take a while.”

“Yes, yes. Considering the situation, I’ll go to them.”

That was quick. Better than him hemming and hawing and dragging his feet, though.

“I need to assess this tunnel you made anyway,” he added. I didn’t really like the way he said *assess*, like he was a teacher grading me on a test or something.

“When do you want to head out?” I asked.

“I have some pressing work I need to finish tomorrow. I also need to get in touch with the trade guild. I suppose we’ll leave the day after tomorrow.”

“The trade guild?”

“According to the letter, the guild master of their trade guild committed some crimes. I’ve got to run that by ours, haven’t I? If possible, I would like to take the guild master, too. How many people can your bears seat?”

“Two would be fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yep. But I won’t let the guild master ride if they frighten my bears.”

“I don’t *think* she’d scare them,” said Cliff. “If she does, we can go on without her.”

Pretty accommodating of Cliff. I could live with that, I guess?

“I’ll go to your house the day after tomorrow,” he said, “so please wait for me there.”

I promised Cliff I would and, with that, headed out into the hallway...and Noa rushed up to me.

“Yuna! Please let me know when you’re coming, okay?”

“I was here for Cliff today.”

“Are you done with that?”

“For today, sure.”

“Then that means you have time.”

She had such a sweet smile, but the person behind Noa *also* smiled...a sinister smile, dripping with doom.

I raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure? You realize Lala’s been just smiling at us for a while now, yeah?”

Noa turned around and went pale at the sight of Lala’s smile, and its hidden dagger.

“Lady Noir,” said Lala, “you are still in the middle of your studies.”

“I’m tired, though. I would like a break. I need my dose of bear.”

Dose of *bear*? What, was bear a required nutrient now? Just imagine something like that getting discovered on earth and announced. The Nobel Prize ceremony would be grizzly stuff, I bet.

Noa whined and whined, and at last Lala let out a small, defeated sigh. “All right. But only for a bit. Ms. Yuna, may I ask that you accompany Lady Noir for a short time?”

“Sure thing.”

“Well then, if you could. I will make preparations for tea.” With a brief dip of her head, Lala left us.

“Okay, Yuna, let’s go to my room.” Noa pulled on my bear puppet glove. “You gotta tell me, where were you?”

“You know that ocean you get to once you cross over the Elezent mountain range?”

“The—no way, you got over that mountain?”

“Well, I’ve got my bears.”

“That’s so amazing! The ocean...that’s nice. I’d like to go too.”

“Why don’t we, when it warms up?”

“I’d like to, but my father doesn’t allow distant excursions.”

“Oh it’s okay. I’m bringing it closer, in a way.”

“Hm?” Noa gave her head a little tilt.

I couldn’t tell her about the tunnel just yet, so I kept things ambiguous, “I’ll make him realize it’s closer than he thinks.”

“Will you really? Then it’s a promise. And um, Yuna? Can I have a favor?” She looked at me with upturned eyes and pinchable, blushing cheeks. Ugh, even I wasn’t immune to this level of cuteness. Too much power. “Can I borrow your bears?”

Exactly what I expected. I mean, she just talked about getting a dose of bear in earlier. Since the opportunity presented itself, I decided this was a great time to show her the bears in their newly compact cub forms.

Whoosh.

“Wh-Wh-What is this?! What are these bears?!”

“They’re Kumayuru and Kumakyu. They should fit in your room at this size, right?”

Noa slowly approached the bears. I wondered why—she must’ve known by now that they weren’t going to run away or whatever. Then, with a determined huff, she gave them both gigantic bear hugs. “Yunaaaaaa?”

“Yessssssss?”

“Can I have them?”

“You gotta know that’s a no.” Predictably, Noa got in trouble with Lala when she refused to let go of the bears ten, twenty, thirty minutes after her break was supposed to be over.

The next day, I headed to the orphanage to check in with Fina and Tiermina. Orphans surrounded the place, energetic and playful as ever—these were the little kids of the bunch. The youngest were just starting to walk and the older ones were five-ish. Since the little kids couldn’t take care of the birds or do manual labor, they got to have fun playing outside.

The kids swarmed me when they saw me.

“Bear girl!”

“In the flesh. Or fur. Or whatever. Are you all getting along?” I looked them over. One of the kids stood a step behind everyone else, watching me. A new kid, then?

“Yeah!” one of the kids said.

“Mmhm! We’re all playing together!”

A look around showed that they were right—no kids being left out.

“Well, I see you’re all being good.”

“Hee hee!”

“Make sure to keep playing nice, now.”

“Uh-huh!” The kids burst into smiles at that. One of the kids grabbed the new orphan’s hand, then, and broke into a run, the others trailing close behind. The new kid smiled and melted right in with the others.

The headmistress and Liz were putting in the work, like always. The kids were all right.

From there, I headed to the small shed where Tiermina worked, right beside the henhouse, counting out the eggs that the kids collected. The kids older than six took care of the birds, collected the eggs, and cleaned the henhouses.

Sure enough, I found Tiermina there in the shed, right in the middle of counting. Fina and Shuri flanked Tiermina, eager to lend her a hand.

“Yuna!” Tiermina gave me a way.

“I’m back, g—” but before I could finish my sentence, Fina and Shuri rushed across the shed gleefully for a hug.

“Nothing exciting happened while I was out?” I asked the two of them. If something *had* happened, they would have contacted me on the bear phone, and the calm atmosphere told me things were uneventful, but I figured I might as well ask.

“Nope, nothing. Mom and Dad are getting along fine too.”

Good to hear. Maybe Fina and Shuri would get a new brother or sister before long.

“Fina, don’t overshare,” said Tiermina sternly. She looked a little embarrassed to hear her own daughter explain their home life to me.

I gave Fina and Shuri pats on the head and crossed the shed to their mom. “Tiermina, I made it back.”

“We’re glad to see you. How was the ocean?”

“Things got a little busy, but it was all fun in the end.” Oh, and with a pack of robbers here, giant kraken there...

“Was it, now? I’ve been there before in my adventuring days, but I do miss it sometimes.”

Hm. Maybe next time I could take Tiermina and the kids to the ocean with me. Fina and Shuri probably hadn’t even seen the ocean before.

Kids and Tiermina—check. Next objective: the headmistress.

The bear statue watched over the entrance to the newly built orphanage. I ran a hand over it and asked, from the bottom of my heart, that it keep these kids safe. Inside, I found the headmistress and Liz going about their business.

“Headmistress, here’s a souvenir,” I said, after a brief catchup. I pulled out the mammoth hoard of fresh seafood I’d gotten at the festival from my bear storage. I mean, it wasn’t like a single person could’ve eaten the amount of food they served me anyway—it was one plate after another, and I’d be stuck with leftovers forever and ever till they entombed me with seafood.

“Is this fish?” The headmistress studied it. “Goodness. Now that’s a rarity you’ve brought us. It’s a little bit early, but why don’t we gather the children for lunch?”

“I’ll call them,” said Liz, and left us.

“So, headmistress, do you know how to prep fish?”

“I’ve dressed river fish before, yes.”

Ehh, it wasn’t like they got fish often at the orphanage, so I shouldn’t have

expected a master of the fried and fishy arts. I needed to get Anz to Crimonia,
and fast.

Chapter 98:

The Bear Heads to the Tunnel

I SPENT THE DAY after coming back hanging with Fina and Shuri, which meant that the next day was time to go to Mileela with Cliff. There I stood in front of the bear house, then, waiting for Cliff and—maybe—the master of the trade guild.

Which was fine enough, I guess...but if she spooked my bears, she'd have to follow on foot or not at all. I don't like people as it is, and I'm not going to make my bears carry someone who freaked them out.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," said Cliff. Milaine walked along beside him.

"It wasn't long, but, uh. What's Milaine doing with you?" Seemed weird, seeing those two together. But then, maybe they hung out all the time slightly off-screen or something.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Cliff. "Milaine is the trade guild's master in this town. And—hold on a minute, don't the two of you already know each other?"

"Milaine, you're the guild master?" This was the first I was hearing about it.

"Oh, did I not tell you?" Milaine said with a little, just-a-little-too-cute gasp. Yep, she definitely hadn't told me on purpose. I eyed her suspiciously. "I'm kidding. Honestly, there just wasn't a good time to tell you. Whether I'm the guild master or just a regular employee doesn't affect our relationship, right?"

Yeah, sure she "forgot." She must have enjoyed keeping quiet about it.

"Milaine, how old are you supposed to be again?" She looked way too young to be a guild master, but maybe—kinda like Ellelaura—her looks were deceiving.

"How rude. I'm in my twenties; can't you tell?"

Which covered ten whole years, and isn't there a huge different between twenty and twenty-nine? I guess she must've been in her *late* twenties, then, and didn't want to say it. Still, I couldn't say it wasn't impressive that she was a

guild master even at that age.

But...then again, it did line up. When we sold the eggs wholesale and started up the shop, Milaine had made a lot of unilateral decisions. Decisions a normal employee wouldn't be able to make. She said "It's fine" or "Leave it to me" a lot. Moreover, it wasn't like any regular nobody could refuse to sell eggs to the feudal lord and get away with it. Now that I thought about it, there'd been a ton of fishy things going on. And all the while, she'd been...been *bamboozling* me with how young she looked. The audacity!

Cliff whirled to face us, irritation plain on his face. "I don't care whether you're twenty, thirty, or even forty. Let's get going."

"W-Wait a second," stammered Milaine. "There's a huge difference between twenty and thirty, and...forties? How dare you? You must be a real hit with the ladies."

"I don't need to be. You see, Milaine, I happen to be happily married with children." He wasn't wrong—his wife ElleLaura was crazy pretty, and his kids Noa and Shia were adorable. Unless he was a looser guy than I thought, he didn't need to be popular with the ladies.

"Cliff," said Milaine. "You're not trying to pick a fight with me, are you?"

"I'm simply stating the facts."

Tension brewed down here in front of the bear house. Our two combatants stood in front of each other, like cats and dogs about to scrap! I couldn't really decide who was the cat and who was the dog, but maybe if the fight started—oh, wait.

Right, we had actual business to worry about.

"Milaine," I said, "will you come to Mileela?"

"Well, there is the trade guild scandal to deal with, and I do want to see if all this talk about a tunnel is true. If there is a tunnel, after all, we can start trading with Mileela, and none of that can be organized without the presence of the guild master. Which is me."

I managed not to roll my eyes.

“Most importantly,” said Milaine, “going gives me the opportunity to ride your infamous bears! I’d go even if I had to play hooky from work.”

Wait a second...whenever I saw her at the trade guild, she always seemed to be at the reception desk. Was she really doing guild master stuff, or just lounging about all the time? “Don’t play hooky—just do your job!”

“Precisely. I’m going to Mileela as *part* of my job, aren’t I?”

Cliff blinked. “Uh...I can’t really say that you’re *not*...” Cliff gave me a helpless look. He had nothin’.

“Excellent.” Milaine grabbed me by the shoulders and started walking. “Yuna, may I go meet these bears everyone’s been talking about?” A visibly astonished Cliff followed behind us. Well, she *was* doing her job, so I guess...I guess it all worked out?

Sure, why not?

On our way out of the town, our weird party took the gate guards by surprise. Anybody would be a little shocked to see the feudal lord and the trade guild’s master just casually hanging out together, but I just hoped that I wasn’t another reason for the surprise on their faces.

Finally outside of the town, I held out my bear puppets in front of me and summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

“The infamous bears.” Milaine squinted at them as if they might disappear.

“Cliff, you ride on Kumayuru. Milaine and I will get on Kumakyu together.”

“Kumayuru was the black one, right?” Cliff knew what I meant just by the bears’ names and headed toward Kumayuru.

“Yuna, did you say their names are Kumayuru and Kumakyu?”

“The black one is Kumayuru. The white one is Kumakyu.”

Milaine chuckled. “Those names are very like you, Yuna.”

“Wait, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, just that the names suit their appearances and are very cute.” Milaine

smiled mischievously.

Kumayuru and Kumakyu? Cute? I didn't know about that, but I'd grown attached to them. If I had better naming sensibilities, maybe they'd have better names, but I don't see why you *need* cool names when you have two gigantic, fuzzy, incredibly powerful bear buddies.

Milaine approached Kumakyu. "Well then, Kumakyu, I'm counting on you." She gave Kumakyu's neck a rub. Kumakyu seemed to like that. "All right, Yuna. How should I get on?"

Unlike a horse, my bears didn't have saddles, but Kumakyu kneeled down for Milaine to mount more easily. I got on first, then Milaine climbed on behind me.

"What do you think?" I said. "It's comfortable even without a saddle, right?"

"And it's this comfortable the whole time, I assume?"

Yeah, the comfort from my buddies was just unmatched. Comfy enough that you had to worry less about bumps in the road and more about nodding off in the middle of the journey.

We headed on bearback to the Elezent mountain range where my tunnel was. We started with a light gallop.

"They run so smoothly."

Kumayuru and Kumakyu ran side by side.

"It's nice that they're quick. Carriages are just so slow."

Carriages? C'mon how could a carriage be anything close to this? My bears gradually picked up the pace, and just a few hours later we arrived at the foot of the Elezent mountains and where my tunnel was...that is, where it was *supposed* to be.

"I thought it was around here..." I mumbled. I checked the map again, and yeah—this was it, right?

"Did you get lost?" Cliff asked.

In the middle of my definitely-not-a-panic, Kumakyu started walking off

without warning. “Kumakyu?”

But Kumakyu and Kumayuru kept plodding along almost as though they were telling us to leave it to them. After a few minutes, we found the tunnel obscured by the surrounding trees.

Milaine laughed. “Looks like the bears are sharper than you.”

This time, I didn’t have a good reply.

We took a break before we headed into the tunnel.

“At any rate, we got here quickly thanks to the bears,” said Cliff.

“Mm. Any merchant would be chomping at the bit to get one of their own.”

“Adventurers too.”

They shared their impressions of my bears while we drank oran juice. I didn’t care how much money anyone tried offering me. No way was I ever letting go of my bears. Cliff could just try to steal them from me and see what happened.

“Oh, Yuna, stop glaring at me like that. No one is thinking of stealing your bears. I could live a hundred lives, spend them all trying to steal from you, and it would go badly for me every time.” Cliff gave my head a tap with his knuckles, like he was trying to give me a noogie.

With our rest out of the way, Cliff and Milaine headed to the tunnel’s entrance.

“This is the tunnel you made, Yuna?” asked Cliff, slipping into his Serious Lord Voice. He inspect the tunnel carefully, Milaine beside him. “Looks like it’s big enough for two carriages to move past each other?”

“That’s right. Looks like it’s large enough for that.”

“Yes,” mused Cliff, “it’s larger than I thought it would be.”

“But I doubt a larger carriage would be able to share the tunnel with others heading the opposite way.”

“You think we should regulate the carriage sizes then?”

“Maybe,” said Milaine, “but that could become a whole ordeal if someone who didn’t know there was a size limit came along.”

“In that case, how about we divide things between odd and even days? That way they’d only need to wait a day.”

“We’re getting a little ahead of ourselves, Cliff.”

“Hmm, yes. First, let’s check how long the tunnel is and then decide based on how the situation progresses.”

Maybe I should’ve made it a little bigger?

“And we’ll need to open up this space and make an outpost,” Cliff added. “We’ll need someone to manage the tunnel too.”

Milaine looked around. The foliage around here was dense. “Then we have to decide on the toll for usage.”

“How much do you think is appropriate?”

“Usually we decide based on the funds used to make the tunnel.”

They shot a glance at me. “You’re going to charge people for it?”

“That goes without saying,” said Milaine. “What kind of fool would offer something for free? Consider the maintenance costs alone, and on top of that? We’ll have to hire soldiers or adventurers to station here, surely.”

“Yes, we’d end up with a disaster if any robbers or monsters took up residence inside the tunnel.”

I guess they were right— monsters *would* probably get into the tunnel if they just left it as is, hence the soldiers and adventurers. On top of that, they’d need to station guys on both sides of the tunnel. The fee made sense, whether or not I liked it.

“Also,” Cliff muttered, gazing into the dark, “we’ll need to light up the inside of the tunnel with mana gems.”

“We’ll need to install light mana gems and mana lines. That alone will cost a pretty penny.”

Mana lines were pretty much what they sounded like: channels to route mana

through. Think the electrical lines of Earth and you're on the right track. I even had mana lines in my bear house—in order to turn on the mana gems in the ceiling, I'd touch a normal mana gem on a nearby wall that would transmit mana to the gem on the ceiling via the lines.

"Ah, yes, and of *course* we'll need to install wind mana gems."

"Guess we would, for something this long. Actually, Yuna, how long is it from this side to the opposite side? We might need to set up a break spot somewhere in there."

On and on the two of them talked about how my tunnel should be used in the future without me. Fair enough, I guess—as long as we could bring seafood to Crimonia, ehh. If it wasn't as simple as I thought, I'd have to leave the practical details to the specialists.

After a short break, we headed out into the tunnel. I made a bear light and set it up ahead of us, enchanting it to move along with me.

"Yuna," said Cliff, some time in, "could we slow down? I need to check on the state of the tunnel and how long it is."

The bears walked slowly on through the dark.

"No drips from the ceiling," said Cliff, staring up. It almost sounded like a question.

"Nah, I used magic to set it up so water runs along the outside. There won't be any drips in here." I was going for more "cool tunnel" and less "surprise limestone cave."

Milaine nodded. "That'll make things easier."

"Yeah. Now we just need to think about how resilient the tunnel is. We'd have a situation on our hands if it caves in."

"That shouldn't be an issue if we just reinforce it with earth mana gems."

Installing earth mana gems in earth walls supposedly made them stronger. Mana gems were embedded in the walls protecting the capital and the towns, or so people said.

“Then we need earth mana gems in addition to the light and wind gems.” Milaine whistled. “That’ll take a chunk of change.”

Light mana gems to illuminate the tunnel, wind gems to circulate the air, and earth gems to reinforce the tunnel...that was it so far, right? “Isn’t that what the toll is for?”

Milaine shook her head. “How will we get the initial funds? A deferred payment wouldn’t exactly work for the trade guild.”

“Don’t worry,” said Cliff, “we’ve got the money.”

“Then the issue is how we secure all those mana gems.”

“Could you have the trade guild collect them?”

“Well...it’s not impossible, but I would be worried about the market collapsing. I’d also rather avoid causing a shortage.”

“Then maybe we could order them from the capital?”

“I think that would be more advisable. We’d run into the same issues if we got them from the nearby towns, but that wouldn’t be a concern for the capital.”

“I’ll prepare the funds, so can I count on you to do it?”

“Yes, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

Wow, tunneling was harder than I thought. I guess no digging a hole and calling it done, because of the whole “people needed stuff like light and oxygen to stay comfortable and not dead.” The same went for the shop—an amateur like me working alone just got a plan full of holes.

We pushed on and the two kept up their conversation, but the exit just wasn’t showing up. But what else was I expecting when we were going at a snail’s pace. Isn’t that right, *Cliff*?

“It would be rather frightening if the light just went out midway through,” said Milaine.

“Yuna, are you sure we can rely on this strange, outlandish light?”

Excuse me, strange? *Outlandish*? It was clearly a lovable bear. I mean, yes, I did think it was outlandish for a little while when I first saw it, but still. “Don’t

worry about it.” And if it went out, I’d make another one.

“Since installing light mana gems in the ceiling would be cumbersome, we’ll make do by embedding them along the walls.”

Yeah...since I made the ceiling high enough for carriage clearance, any normal person wouldn’t be able to reach up there. To install anything in the ceiling, they’d have to set up a platform each time.

“That would work much better,” said Cliff. “Even if one side went out, we’d have the reassurance of the lights on the other side remaining on.”

“That would double the cost, but what’s one to do?”

They made a lot of progress on their conversation, but we weren’t anywhere close to the end of the tunnel.

Cliff yawned. “This thing goes on and on, doesn’t it?”

“Well, I dug straight through the mountain range, but I still had to cover a lot of distance.”

“Then we should really make a rest stop,” he said.

“If we do,” Milaine added, “we should place it right in the middle of the tunnel.”

I could feel their eyes on me.

“You mean you want *me* to make one?”

“Yuna,” said Cliff, “you’ve already excavated this whole thing. What’s creating a little rest stop compared to that? I think one right in the middle would work best, like Milaine said, but we’d need to get an accurate measure of the tunnel for that.”

“I’ve got no idea how long this thing is, but I can tell you where the middle is on a map.” It’d be a rough estimate, but close enough to be useful.

“Can you really?”

“It’s just a little bit further.”

I had Kumayuru break out into a run while I navigated the map—a map which, by the way, I could open up and look at without anyone else seeing it. I tested

that one out on Fina.

“The center point is just about...” I poked at a map they couldn’t see “...here.”

“How do you know?” Cliff marveled.

“Err, it’s just an approximation, so don’t put too much faith in me.”

“As long as it’s more or less correct, fine. Could you open up this spot a little right around here?”

Following Cliff’s instructions, I pushed out the wall using earth magic.

He let out a low, impressed whistle. “Amazing. You can dig holes just like that.”

Time passed, and soon enough I cleared out enough rock for several carriages to pull over and rest.

“Phenomenal,” said Cliff, shaking his head. “But if this is the center, I suppose we don’t have time to tarry. Yuna, I hate to ask, but could we pick up the pace?”

About time. We practically flew through the remaining half of the tunnel.

Chapter 99:

The Bear Returns to Mileela Seaport

THE SUN SET around the time we exited the tunnel. The sea breeze came over us and blessed our lungs with fresh air—all the better because we had just spent hours and hours muddling about beneath the mountains. Cliff and Milaine seemed just as relieved as me as the three of us looked out over the ocean.

“It’s so pretty,” said Milaine.

“Mm. That it is.”

“With the new tunnel, I suppose we could take our holidays here.”

“Maybe I’ll bring my daughter along with me next time.”

(Here’s hoping. Noa would absolutely lose it.)

“I never imagined we’d get to the other side of the Elezent mountains in a single day.”

“I don’t even want to *think* about how long it would’ve taken to take the long way around.”

Neither did I, and I’d done the thing. The three of us talked and walked and watched the sunset over the sea. The same old guard that first greeted me waited outside of the seaport. I recalled Kumayuru and Kumakyu, and then headed for the entrance.

“Bear girl! You’ve come back!” The gate guard rushed over, looking delighted. “I heard you left while I wasn’t here. Not being able to thank you before you went tore me apart, my dude!”

Now that he mentioned it, there really had been a different person when I left. Oops.

“Thanks for rescuing the town, yeah?”

It was a lot to have someone just...say that to me, right to my face. Maybe I

flushed red, maybe I didn't. "Tons of other people already thanked me, so you don't need to. And, I mean, you all gave me so much rice already!"

The thank-you rice was the best part, to be honest. Favoring gifts over the nice thoughts wasn't a great look, admittedly, but ehh.

"Yeah, but I'd like you to know I brought over rice from my house too! It wasn't all that much, but I brought it!"

"Really? Thank you. I'll savor every bite when I get to it," I said, which made his face light up.

"I do love hearing about someone else's victory rice," said Cliff, "but could you let us through sometime soon?"

"Oh, ha! Sorry about that, man. Do you two, like...do you know her? That's pretty cool."

"Yes, that's right."

"*Ahem.*" The guard stiffened, slipping immediately back into professional mode. "Could I see your cards? Just part of the job is all."

Cliff and Milaine obediently handed over their cards. The man looked those over. His expression changed right before our eyes.

"You're the Count and the guild master..." He returned the cards and solemnly bowed his head. "Please accept my deepest apologies. Right this way, milord."

Cliff shrugged. "Don't beat yourself up over it. You don't need to be so formal."

"That's right," said Milaine, giving Cliff a little nudge. "You don't need to bow down to this guy." The guard seemed just as startled to see that Milaine was a guild master as I was.

We headed into the seaport proper. The sun had fully set now, and the sky was dark. Looked like we wouldn't be having our discussion today. "It's pretty late. What do you two want to do? I can lead you to an inn, if you need one."

"No, I want to meet the adventurers' guild's master first."

“Right,” said Milaine. “Since there’s no mayor, we really should greet the three elders representing the town, but it’s too late today. For now, let’s get the lay of the land from the guild master.”

The townspeople who noticed me greeted me on the way to the adventurers’ guild. Most of them thanked me, but a few were mad that I ran off without saying anything.

“Seems you’re quite popular, Yuna,” said Milaine.

“She *did* defeat the kraken, if you recall.”

“Yes, yes, but that can’t be *all* of it. Look at how adorable this girl is and tell me, honestly, that it doesn’t factor into her popularity.”

My *appearance*? The whole bear thing? Awesome, great, love it. All along, I worried that the bear onesie would become the only thing I had going for me—like someone telling me my only defining feature was ribbons or glasses—and here it was. Ugh, here was a depressing thought: what if I walked around later without my onesie and all of the townspeople ignored me?

Huh. Weird, wasn’t it? I mean, here I was, always complaining about people bothering to talk to me, but if they didn’t talk to me? That would be even worse. I’d just feel lonely. Three tired cheers for abandonment issues, I guess?

Well, whatever. The important thing was that the bear onesie wasn’t, like, a *part* of me. It wasn’t Yuna, you know? Yeah. Definitely not.

For sure.

We found the staff members cleaning up at the adventurers’ guild, but we didn’t spot any adventurers. I heard there were a lot of adventurers in jail now for scheming with the trade guild, and that a lot of other ones left town, maybe from the sheer guilt.

“Ms. Yuna?” A staff member noticed me, and from there they *all* noticed me.

“Is Atola in?” I asked.

“Yes, she’s here. I’ll call her over right away.”

The employee jogged to an inner room, a door crashed somewhere in the back, and Atola came right to us. Dressed in her usual, uh, *chesty* outfit.

“If it isn’t Yuna! Back already?”

“Hey, Atola. Good to be back.”

“How’d it go? What did Crimonia’s lord say?” I guess she hadn’t noticed Cliff and Milaine.

“Atola, let’s step back a bit. I’ll explain.”

“Oh, for sure. Right, so who are these two?” she asked, looking over Cliff and Milaine.

“This man is the lord of Crimonia, Cliff Fo...Fro...? Listen, it’s a cool noble name or whatever, who knows.”

Cliff gave my head a little poke. “Do you not even know my name? If you introduced another noble like that, you’d be in trouble. You’re lucky it’s just me.”

I shrugged. “Then why bring it up?” Cliff’s name was so long, there was no way I could remember the whole thing. Besides, I’d never said it out loud before.

“You’re just so...” Cliff let out a deep, exasperated sigh before looking over to Atola. “I am the feudal lord of Crimonia, Cliff Fochrosé. We just arrived. Late though it is, we believe it would only be right to greet you as soon as possible.”

“You’re Crimonia’s lord, mm?” Atola echoed, eyes gleaming with excitement.

I rolled my eyes. Just like Atola, huh? Well. Cliff already had a beautiful wife named ElleLaura, so she best knock it off.

“And this woman,” Cliff continued, “is the guild master of Crimonia’s trade guild, Milaine.”

“And you’re the trade guild’s master?” Atola stared at her, surprised.

“I’m Milaine, and I have the pleasure of serving as the guild master of Crimonia’s trade guild. It seems that one of our own has stirred up quite a bit of trouble. Please allow me to offer my deepest apologies.”

Finally, Atola came to her senses. “Y-yes, of course. I’m Atola and I serve as the guild master for the seaport’s adventurers’ guild. Thank you for coming such a long way.”

“Is it far away?” Cliff raised an eyebrow.

“Is it really?” added Milaine.

The pair were having fun with this, huh? Atola looked them over, a quizzical look on her face. “I never would have imagined the lord and the trade guild’s master would come here in person.”

“Considering the contents of the letter,” said Cliff, “we couldn’t entrust these matters to anyone else. My apologies for not making arrangements before our arrival.”

“Not at all, I’m simply thankful you’ve come. You haven’t imposed at all.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Well, Lord Cliff,” said Atola apologetically, “it *is* a bit late to attempt a meeting now. I would like to go over the full details tomorrow. Would that be all right?”

“I understand completely. Yes, that’s fine.”

“And as for the matter of where you will be staying tonight...” Atola hesitated. “Now, *normally* you would stay at the mayor’s residence, but we do not currently have a mayor, and so we are not in a position to offer our best hospitality, so you see...” Atola’s voice grew softer and softer.

“You don’t have to trouble yourself with that. We arrived unannounced, after all. An inn will suffice.”

Atola bowed her head a second time. “Thank you very much. I will send a staff member to meet you at the inn tomorrow, so I hope you’ll have a leisurely evening. Naturally, we will cover the cost of the inn.”

“Yes, we will graciously accept your offer to rest.”

“Yuna,” said Atola, turning to me, “I’m guessing you’re going to stay at Deigha’s?”

“Yup, I want to let them know I’m back too.” There was the stuff with Anz, too, and...honestly? I didn’t know what the other inns were like around here, and I didn’t care enough to find out. “Also, Atola, aren’t you talking kinda funny?”

Atola blinked. “Yuna! Who do you think we’re talking to?” She stole a quick glance at Cliff.

“Cliff?” I offered. That didn’t seem to be enough for some reason. “Cliff, who is the lord of Crimonia and stuff?”

“And *stuff*? You should know better. And shouldn’t you really be calling him *Lord* Cliff rather than by his first name?”

Oh, huh. I switched over to a first-name basis with Cliff without even realizing it. When had that started? Since the first time we met, right? And if it wasn’t then, surely all the orphanage stuff really cinched it.

“Uhh. Lord...Cliff? Cliff the Lord?”

Cliff flinched. “Stop that! Hearing you say that is just...repugnant!”

“Okay, no need to be a jerk about it.”

“No, it’s... Atola is acting how normal people would around nobles, you see. You’re the odd one. Not that I *like* it when others fret about me to this extent, but it would also be a problem if everyone acted the way you do, Yuna. Guild master, if you could just act normally around me, that would be helpful.”

“I’ll do my best. May I ask how many people accompanied you here?”

“None.”

Atola was stunned silent. Nobles were normally accompanied by guards, weren’t they?

“We have Yuna. We didn’t need guards.”

“You’re serious?”

“Yes. In fact, we came all this way on Yuna’s bears. Based on the letter, I thought it would be best to come as soon as possible. It was the quickest way.”

“Th-Thank you so much.” Atola was deeply moved. Seemed a little out-of-

character for her, didn't it? But she just kept going on in this strange tone. Gave me the creeps. "Please allow the guild employees to guard you, at the very least."

"Atola, it's fine," I said. "We have the bears—that is, me."

"But..."

"How 'bout this? You can give them guards when I'm not with them."

Atola bit her lip. "Fine. I suppose I'll count on your bears to watch over them tonight."

"As long as they're at the inn, the bears—that is, I!— will keep them just fine." Kumayuru and Kumakyu didn't need to sleep, either.

Since it was getting late, we soon wrapped things up and left the adventurers' guild. Just a few days later, there I was at Deigha's inn.

"Young miss! You're back?" Deigha, the giant that he was, came shambling over the moment I opened the door.

"I am. Starting today, I'm your problem again."

"Ha! You're always welcome here. Who are those two?" Deigha looked over at Cliff and Milaine, standing behind me.

"I'm Yuna's friend, Cliff," he said with a nod. "We'll be imposing on you for a while."

"And I'm Milaine."

"A friend of Yuna is a friend of mine. We've got oodles of open rooms. Stay as long as you like. Free of charge, of course!" Since Atola covered the costs, it wouldn't make a difference that it was free to us anyway.

"Oh, are you sure you can just say that?" Milaine let out a fake little gasp. "What if Yuna fell in with the wrong crowd? What if we wanted to stay here...*forever*?"

"She doesn't make those kinda friends. If you were telling the truth, then the whole lot of you would be imposters."

“Heh. It seems he has a lot of trust in you, Yuna!”

“I wouldn’t immediately trust strangers, but this girl’s a different sort. Everyone here agrees on that.” What was with this faith they had in me? It was kind of frightening. Had I really done anything that great?

Well, uh. Now that I thought about it...yes?

I distributed food, captured robbers, rescued captives, accidentally cleaned up the trade guild, boiled the kraken, and then donated all the cooked squid bits. When you put it all down plainly, just like that, I guess it’d only be natural for them to trust me.

“If she tells me that you’re her friends,” said Deigha, “then that alone is worth my trust.”

C’mon, this was getting culty. I didn’t want a cult—that sounded like a huge pain. “It really wasn’t a big deal—I was just in the moment, doing whatever. I mean it, please don’t put too much stock in it, I wasn’t trying to be a savior or whatever.” Whatever was going on here, I just had to stop it.

“But...” Deigha frowned.

“If you really want to thank me, just do me a simple favor next time.”

“What’s that? What simple favor?”

“I guess it’s still a secret.”

“Come now, if it’s something I can do, I’ll hear you out.” Was he sure? Could he really just make a promise willy-nilly like that?

Mwahahaha...I would be...taking his daughter! ...because the two of us already talked about that sort of thing, obviously. I just needed permission from her dad, now, but that could wait a bit.

“Well then, friends of the bear girl, I’ll whip up a feast! Eat to your heart’s content.” Deigha loaded the table with seafood cuisine and the two of them ate till they were stuffed.

We each rented out our own rooms and relaxed, sleeping off today’s adventure for the promise of tomorrow. I didn’t forget to summon Kumayuru and Kumakyu as guards.

“Make sure you let me know if you notice anyone suspicious coming around near Cliff or Milaine’s rooms too,” I asked Kumayuru and Kumakyu, gently stroking their heads. They gave me a soft “cwoom” in reply.

Chapter 100:

The Bear Is Unnecessary?

Part One

KUMAYURU AND KUMAKYU woke me up in the morning, and I found myself hugging Kumayuru. Must've latched onto the big guy without realizing it while I was asleep. Now *that's* a comfy sleep.

But Kumakyu sulked a little because I'd been hugging Kumayuru instead. That didn't seem fair—I mean, I was asleep at the time, so I couldn't help it and I did *not* need all that today. But then again, Kumakyu looked so miserable with those big cute eyes that I promised we'd sleep together tonight. With that, I sent the both of them away for now.

Cliff and Milaine were already eating breakfast when I got to the dining hall.

"You two are up early."

"Time is of the essence," said Cliff. "We have a lot to do."

"I actually would have liked a bit more shut-eye, but I'm willing to sacrifice those comforts if—" she let out a tiny yawn "—I positively *must*."

"You didn't sleep well?" Hmm. Deigha didn't have to know that—he might blame himself.

"My thoughts were just buzzing away," said Milaine. "I barely got a wink of sleep."

"Seems like your work's cut out for both of you," I said.

Cliff gave Milaine a look, then stared at me. "Yuna..."

"Oh, Yuna..." Milaine rubbed her eyes.

"Whose fault do you think this whole situation is?" Cliff said.

"Wait, are you blaming *me* for all of this?" What was there to blame me *for*? Being too good at being great?

“I wouldn’t say it’s your *fault*,” said Cliff delicately, “but you should think about what you’ve done.”

Hmph. I didn’t really agree, but I suppose I could see where Cliff was coming from and there was no point in arguing. Well, whatever. I asked Deigha for a meal, plopped myself down in a chair, and waited.

“All things considered, though, this is a nice seaport. I took a short stroll around here before breakfast.”

“Mm. It’s hard to imagine there were bandits and a kraken here.”

Anz came out with my breakfast, a spring in her step and a bright customer service smile on her face. “You can thank Ms. Yuna for that. She brought peace to this seaport, don’t you know?”

I shifted in my chair. “That’s an exaggeration.”

“Oh? Well, Ms. Yuna, you’ll have to argue with everyone in the seaport.”

Cliff laughed. “Guess Yuna’s something of a hero around here, eh?”

Ugh, really? Was it too late to opt out of this hero thing?

A little after we finished our meal, Sei from the adventurers’ guild popped in to greet us.

“Good morning, everyone. Did you have a good night’s sleep?”

“Yes, it was lovely,” said Milaine. She acted all drowsy practically all morning, but she slipped so easily into the guild master persona.

“I’m glad. If I may be so forward, I would like to take you to the adventurers’ guild at this time. Would that be all right?”

Breakfast was finished, so they didn’t object to Sei’s proposal...which meant, finally, that I had some time to myself while those two were off on their talks. The weather was nice, so maybe I’d head to the ocean. Or no, maybe I could head to the square and see if they were selling anything interesting? Or nah, maybe now was the time to check in with Atola and go look at my brand new plot of land for the bear house?

“Yuna, what are you doing?” Cliff noticed that I wasn’t rising from my seat. “We’re heading out.”

“We as in you or we as in *we*?”

“I think you know the answer, Yuna,” he said, looking flabbergasted.

Was it that obvious? How do people pick up on this stuff? “You’re going to be talking stuff over, one town to another, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Do I look like that kinda person?” The answer was supposed to be no. What could I add to town administrative work?

“What are you saying? You’re going to be overseeing the talks. If you’re not there, then what will we do?”

Wait, since when was I overseeing anything? “Milaine?” She had to know this was a bad idea, right?

“You’re the only one among us who knows about this seaport—we need you. I really doubt they would lie, but we do need your expertise.”

“When it comes to negotiating,” said Cliff, “it’s easy to talk about the good stuff, but no one wants to bring up any hard truths or uncomfortable problems. With you around, it’ll be harder for them to take that strategy.”

Was that really true? I didn’t see the people here as being the sort who’d do that. Then again, Cliff and Milaine didn’t know what the townspeople were like, so I guess it made sense enough to them.

Reluctantly, I went along.

When we got to the adventurers’ guild, the employees led us to the same room I’d met with the elders in just a little while ago. Atola and three old men sat in their chairs, with one new addition. Back when I rescued Damon from the mountains, Damon had introduced this one guy from the trade guild as being one of the better ones—Jeremo was his name.

Atola prompted us to sit down, and we got started. “We graciously thank you

for coming all the way to Mileela on such short notice. I could not have imagined that the lord of Crimonia himself would come here on his own accord.”

“*She* asked me to, after all,” Cliff said, but I don’t remember asking him for any such thing. All I’d done was give him the letter and explain the situation. I said he *could* go if he had free time, but...

“In addition,” Cliff continued, “it seems that she’s done something unadvisable and altogether lacking in common sense, and hence there was no possibility in my mind that I could entrust such a delicate matter to one of my subordinates.”

Milaine nodded. “I’m in agreement with Cliff.”

How rude. All I did was defeat the kraken and make a tunnel.

“Before we begin,” said Atola, “let’s start with introductions. I am the master of the adventurers’ guild, Atola. At present, I am assisting with matters concerning the seaport.”

“You’re already aware of who I am, but for decorum’s sake: I am the feudal lord of the town of Crimonia, Cliff Fochrosé. Please don’t trouble yourself with any further formality—I’ve grown used to not concerning myself with such things.”

At which point he gave me a look. Real rude, my dude.

Milaine stood up. “I am Milaine, the guild master of Crimonia’s trade guild. I apologize for the scandal that the seaport’s trade guild caused.”

The three old men followed suit and introduced themselves. Then, finally... “I’m Jeremo, I work for the trade guild, and...I have no clue why I was called here.”

“You’ve come as a representative of the trade guild,” one of the old men said.

“Me? A representative?”

“That’s right. From here on, you will take your orders from guild master Milaine, of Crimonia’s trade guild.”

“Why me?”

Another old man spoke up: “You were the one giving out fish to struggling households and hiding that from your superiors at the trade guild, were you not?”

“You knew?”

“Quite a lot of households smelled like grilled fish, and most of them lacked the means to purchase such a luxury.”

“But that doesn’t mean that I did it.”

“Do not underestimate our information network.”

“So you...knew what I was doing?”

“It pained us to see the food only going to the rich.”

One of the better ones, just like Damon said. Jeremo hadn’t just complained—he’d acted, even if he kept it secret.

“Because the townspeople think so highly of you, we have called you here to represent the trade guild.”

“Yes. If we are to bring the trade guild together, we need someone we can put our trust in.”

Jeremo reluctantly agreed.

“I think that’s enough for the self-introductions,” said Cliff, finally. “We don’t have much time, so let’s continue with the discussion.” Hold on, what about *my* introduction? Was I a third wheel here? Did they not need me because I’m just the bear girl?

Maybe I didn’t need an introduction since everyone knew who I was, but everyone else in the room had done one. It was almost exactly like we’d gotten to the end of class self-introductions and right when I thought it was my turn, someone just was like, “I guess that’s everyone.” Everyone? What about me? What about my feelings?

“According to the letter,” Cliff continued, “you want to join my territory?”

“Yes. In exchange, we would like to be under your protection. We would like

your help if anything happens to this seaport.”

“Like the kraken issue?”

“Yes.”

“I’d like to start things off by saying that a kraken is not an easy monster to defeat. This bear right here just runs contrary to all logic.” Cliff pointed at me. Excuse me, hadn’t anyone taught him that pointing was rude?

“Yes, we understand that. We do not think there will be another one. But let’s suppose that a similar monster did appear here and circumstances grew as dire...in that case, we’d like your promise that you would supply food and such.”

“Food, is it?” Cliff repeated. “Are you aware of the distance between Crimonia and the seaport?”

“Well, ah...” The people on Mileela’s side of the negotiations went silent. Aware of the distance? It was hard not to be. Transporting food would take so much time and labor. They’d wither if they had to cross over a mountain or take the long way around.

“That was a joke,” Cliff said, and cracked up laughing. Milaine joined in.

Atola, Jeremo, and the other three old men were bewildered by that.

“Lord Cliff?”

Atola and the others looked troubled—they really had no idea why this strange lord was losing it at the negotiation table.

“We have an understanding regarding the food supplies,” he said finally. “If the seaport runs into a food shortage, we will lend you our support. However, if my town also faces the same food shortage situation, I can’t make any promises. Does that sound fine?”

“Yes, of course. Our seaport only would have a shortage if we couldn’t go out to sea. I don’t think we would have a shortage at the same time as Crimonia would.”

“Agreed. Let’s state it clearly: if Crimonia has a food shortage, you’ll lend us your support.”

“Yes.” Relief flooded the room. “But how should we transport the food?”

Normally that would be a problem, but... “That’s not an issue. Thanks to this bear right here, that is.” He gave my head a little pat. I could practically see the question marks floating over the heads of everyone but us three.

“This bear right here,” said Cliff, “made a tunnel to Crimonia for the seaport.”

“Hey, you can’t just tell th—”

But someone else started talking before I could complete my thought. “A tunnel?”

“Lord Cliff?” Atola and the others looked like they could barely believe it. It *was* a lot to take in, admittedly.

“Is this true, Yuna?”

“Well,” I mumbled, “more or less.” I *really* had dug it to bring Anz to Crimonia, and to get a supply channel for my seafood.

“Yes,” said Cliff, “we traveled here via that tunnel.”

“You...really aren’t joking then?”

“I suppose it really does sound like a joke, but it’s the truth. With a fast horse, you could get to Crimonia in a day. We’re not sure how long it would take by carriage, but it couldn’t be much longer.”

“And you don’t need to worry about food anymore,” added Milaine.

“We’re going to spread the rumor that the tunnel was always there,” Cliff continued, “so please keep the truth of its construction and of Yuna’s involvement a secret.”

“But why?”

“Supposing someone learned that Yuna had made that, we might end up with other people cropping up hoping that she’ll make one for them as well. That would cause quite the commotion for our Yuna, wouldn’t you say? I’m sure you wouldn’t intend for that to happen either.”

After all was said and done, apparently Cliff really *was* looking out for me.

“Well...” said an old man.

“Of course,” Atola finished.

“So please keep this among us then.”

“Understood.”

Just like that, Atola and the others agreed to Cliff’s proposal.

Chapter 101:

The Bear Is Unnecessary?

Part Two

FROM THERE, we started talking about how the tunnel should be used.

“We need to make the tunnel usable as soon as possible,” said Cliff.

“Isn’t it already usable? You came here through it, right?”

“Yes, but right now it’s less of a tunnel, more of a...long hole, let’s call it.”

Harsh. I put a lot of effort into this thing, you know? But he wasn’t *wrong*, exactly, and I couldn’t think of a good comeback, so...

“The inside of the tunnel is pitch black, so we need to install light mana gems. There are too many trees obscuring the tunnel, too: enough to either hide the entrance or to make it impossible for carriages to pass through. We’ll have to do some landscaping.”

Okay, sure, a *carriage* couldn’t get through. We could both agree on that. But what about a big, beautiful horse? That could make it through, couldn’t it? Maybe? Barely?

“I suppose we could say that’s the reason the tunnel wasn’t discovered until now. Your seaport will need to supply labor and clear the ground, by the way, just as our side will. We’ll provide wages, of course, so don’t worry about that. But *you* will have to manage them,” he said, and stared at Jeremo.

Jeremo blinked. “You mean me?”

“Of *course* I mean you. Aren’t you representing the trade guild?”

“U-Understood. I suppose I am.”

Oof. It was hard to watch, but I bet he’d get the hang of it.

“And regarding the light mana gems?” Jeremo said, standing marginally straighter but looking a little paler.

“I’ll make arrangements for the mana gems, so rest easy. We’ll also need wind and earth mana gems, after all.”

Atola and the others breathed sighs of relief when Cliff said that. I bet they wouldn’t know *what* to do if they had to cough up the money themselves.

“I suppose that’s all we can discuss,” said Cliff. “The rest will go faster if you see the tunnel for yourselves. Today, if possible.”

“Then please,” said Atola, “allow me to prepare carriages.” Quickly, she left to tell Sei about the arrangements—and I do mean quickly, because she came right back. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Cliff was either unfazed or hadn’t noticed. “Elect a representative for the seaport next. I’d like to talk to them next time. Of course, I wouldn’t mind if it were one of you.”

“Like a mayor?”

“Like a mayor. We can’t settle discussions without a proper representative for your people.”

“Yes, of course. Just give us a few days and we’ll have a mayor for you.”

“And in a few days, I’ll meet them,” said Cliff and, looking satisfied, passed the conversation to Milaine.

“Now, then,” said Milaine, smiling broadly at Jeremo. “Today’s trade guild business. Once again, I feel as though I must apologize for the trouble caused by our sister guild in this town. I’ve read the letter from Atola—read it again, in fact, and only got angrier. We do not condone such behavior in the trade guild, and will not stand idly by in its wake. We will mete out the punishment in the same manner we would in Crimonia.”

“Um, if I might ask,” said Jeremo quietly, “what would that take the form of, exactly?”

“Execution,” said Cliff simply. “The seaport will become part of my territory, after all, so it follows that the punishment will be the same I’d deal out to any such low-lives in Crimonia. They murdered people and stole property, and did it

all in one of *my* towns. Therefore, execution. Nothing good would come from letting them live, you see—no, the hearts of your people need the cold comfort of retribution.”

That is, the people of the seaport—those who’d lost fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, grandfathers, grandmothers, and more to starvation and banditry. I couldn’t imagine suffering that and just letting it go.

“We’ll hold the execution in the seaport’s plaza in a few days’ time,” said Cliff. “Viewable to all who wish to see it. Once justice is dispensed, we can forget about this terrible affair.”

“And the robbers too?”

“Regardless of whether they were *just following the orders* of the trade guild, any murderers or rapists will receive the death penalty. Those guilty of less will work in the mines till they’ve earned their freedom.”

It was hard to hear that. He was so certain, so quick to deal that out and move on. Sure, these guys were awful, and sure, they killed defenseless people, but I couldn’t imagine making that kind of decision. I couldn’t imagine having to do that as a job, day in and day out. Cliff knew what he was doing. He was really... something else.

“If any of the relatives of those condemned to death have complaints, you may tell them to freely contact me. Use my name.”

Jeremo nodded vigorously. “We understand. Um, Lord Cliff, thank you very much.”

“No need for that. I’m doing my job.”

“Yes, yes, all very well then,” said Milaine, “but let’s talk about the *future* of the trade guild, shall we?”

Jeremo looked nervous when he heard that.

“One thing I’d like to ask,” said Milaine, “is whether this Jeremo fellow is someone you trust? Is he a hard worker? What sort is he?”

The old men tilted their heads slightly at that question, but immediately had an answer, “Jeremo is by no means diligent, but he turns in his work.”

“Plays hooky sometimes, but the townspeople like him.”

“He *was* stealing fish and redistributing them to the poor just earlier.”

“True, true. Grumble as he may, he does the work and his heart’s in the right place.”

After a little more chatting about Jeremo’s character, Milaine made her decision: “In that case, we’ll make Jeremo the guild master for the seaport.”

“What was that last part?”

“For the seaport.”

“Before that.”

“The guild master, yes. While the guild was (shall we say) unstable, you still earned the close trust of the people. Trust is a valuable commodity in a time like this: if an outsider like me were to become the guild master, it wouldn’t be a good look.”

“But...the guild master? Me?”

“I’ll send someone to assist you. You can take your time learning the ropes.”

“Jeremo,” an elder piped in, “this request is coming from us as well. Do you realize how much hope your actions brought us all?”

Another: “And if you want to play hooky, just dump the work on one of your employees.”

And another: “Jeremo, we’re begging you.”

The elders bowed their heads. Seemed a little irresponsible for a bunch of old dudes to give him permission to play hooky, didn’t it? But I guess the guild master of Crimonia’s trade guild did that too. Was it just part of the job description?

“Yuna, do you have something to add?”

“Nope.”

Milaine gave me a long, suspicious look, and I retreated deep into my bear hood to escape. Ah, the hoodie...a shut-in’s best friend.

“All right,” said Jeremo to the elders, “I understand. Please stop bowing. If you’re sure I’m good enough for the job, then I accept your judgment.”

Milaine smiled when he said that, and Jeremo definitely noticed. As for the bit where his face turned bright red at the sight of her smile...maybe it was a trick of the light, maybe not. Who can say?

“Excellent, Jeremo. I’ve got vital documents for you now, regarding trade guild work, so please get to them the moment they arrive. As for informing the staff and residents—I’ll leave that to you, guild master Jeremo.” Milaine gave a few more details about trade guild business while Jeremo listened intently, and then...

“That about covers it, I’d say. Now we just need to *go* to the trade guild. Cliff, do you think we should start there, or...?”

“We can start with the tunnel. I’d rather have the employees hear about it firsthand from Jeremo and the rest of you. Besides, we need to have the five of you examine the tunnel as our representatives of the seaport.”

Milaine sniffed. “Hm. I suppose you’re right. Let’s go, shall we?”

And on we went—three guild masters (one of them new), some old guys, a mayor, and the bear girl who kicked it all off.

Right outside the adventurers’ guild, we found two roofed carriages waiting for us. Sei stood before them. “Lord Cliff, Miss Milaine. I apologize that we only have small carriages, but I have nevertheless prepared them for you.”

He wasn’t lying about the small part—these were tiny compared to the one that nobleman from the capital, Gran, used. Cliff didn’t seem to mind. “Don’t worry about it.”

And now that I thought about it, no nobles lived in the seaport. Who would use an ostentatious carriage?

Sei directed us to board. The carriages had seats for four people, two pairs facing the other. Cliff, Milaine, Atola, and I piled into the first carriage. The three old men and Jeremo rode in the second one.

Once Atola gave instructions to the driver, the carriages started moving, and we were off. (For real this time.)

“Yuna, thank you for bringing the lord of Crimonia here,” said Atola from beside me. “I really can’t thank you enough.”

“I made a promise, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but I didn’t expect you to drill a tunnel through a mountain in the process.”

Sure. I was happy to let them think that was why I did it, rather than to nab a great seafood chef for Crimonia.

Cliff’s sharp eyes read me like a book. “Yuna, why are you making a face... Huh! It seems she didn’t actually make the tunnel for the town.”

“You didn’t?” Atola asked.

“Whatever could you mean?” I said awkwardly.

“Lies?” said Cliff.

“Lies,” said Milaine.

“Come now, Yuna, spit it out.”

The mighty bear hood failed me.

“Yuna...” Even *Atola* was giving me a look now? Really?

Ugh. The jig was up. I told them the truth: I made the tunnel to secure a distribution channel to bring seafood to Crimonia, and Anz along with it.

Cliff? “...”

Milaine? “...”

Atola? “...”

“I just can’t believe it,” said Cliff.

Atola squinted like she wasn’t sure she could see me. “You did all of that just to bring a cook over?”

“No. I mean, yes, but not *yes* as, uh, the only yes. Did I think it’d be nice to have seafood in Crimonia? That’s a yes. But Atola, you and old man Kuro

seemed like you wanted to have more back and forth with Crimonia, didn't you? Yes. So I thought it'd be nice to have a tunnel—I mean it.” And I *did* mean it—I meant it right from the heart—but they all looked fed up.

“I think,” said Cliff, “it would be best not to tell old Kuro and the others about this.”

“Agreed,” said Milaine.

“Yeah, I'd hate to destroy the *illusion* for them,” said Atola, and that was that.

Huh. For all that work I'd done making the tunnel, all that appreciation dropped like a rock.

Chapter 102:

The Bear Goes to Look at the Tunnel

THE CARRIAGES CLATTERED to a stop at the tunnel site, and Cliff gave the order for us to disembark. Unlike me, it seemed Cliff memorized the way to the tunnel. Good for him, right? I'm sure I'd get it one of these days. Maybe next time.

"We'll walk from here." Cliff headed toward the tunnel after stepping out of the carriage, taking the lead. Felt weird, having the nobleman lead the way. I mean, only three of us knew where the tunnel was (including me, obviously) but it didn't seem like a great idea to have Cliff, incredibly powerful politics guy, head into the forest first. Atola must have felt that way too since she moved to take the lead, but Cliff blocked her.

"Yuna is here," he said. "It's fine."

Oh. He really did have a lot of faith in me, didn't he? If only he said it plainly...

"You really trust Yuna," said Atola.

"On practically any subject, there's not a soul I trust more."

"Practically any subject?"

Cliff gave a little sideways nod in my direction. "Fashion sense."

Was that a compliment or a burn? I couldn't argue with either, so I just wished to myself that he'd shut up. Then again, he *was* relying on me and all, so I used my detection skill to check out our surroundings.

Scanner indicated no signals—no monsters, no people—so I let Cliff keep going his merry way.

We arrived at the tunnel entrance proper without incident. Atola let out this huge gasp when she saw it, like she could hardly believe it was real. "Does this tunnel really connect all the way to Crimonia?" she asked, peering in.

“That may be overstating it,” said Cliff. “It *leads* to where Crimonia is.”

“It’s so dark.”

“Yes—as I said, we’ll need to install light mana gems.”

“*And*, Cliff, we’ll also need wind mana gems to circulate the air like in the mines, along with some earth mana gems to strengthen the tunnel walls,” said Milaine.

The faces of the five representatives from Mileela clouded over at that.

Cliff noticed. “As I said before, we will supply the mana gems, so you can rest easy. That won’t be the seaport’s responsibility.”

“Are you sure? That’s so much, although...” Atola sighed. “Even if you did ask us to cover the costs, the seaport doesn’t have that kind of money. Not right now.”

“Rare to find anyone who does, my town included. We’ll collect what we can’t afford outright from the tunnel’s toll. With the tunnel here, people will start moving between the towns.” Cliff shot me a look. “I’m not talking about anyone in *particular* when I say this, but I’m sure people will travel to Crimonia through this tunnel to sell seafood, and that’s just one group. You’ll have visitors who want to see the ocean, and all kinds of reasons. The more traffic, the more revenue.”

“You say people will come just to see the ocean?” The residents of Mileela didn’t seem to quite grasp why anyone would travel just to see the ocean. Well, the locals probably took the picturesque scenery for granted.

“People born and raised in the seaport might not understand it,” said Cliff, “but people who have never seen the ocean would assuredly pay money for the opportunity.”

“There are people like that?” The old men tilted their heads. They seemed unconvinced.

“Haven’t you felt the desire to see Crimonia?”

“Well...I certainly have.”

“I have.”

“It’s the same thing. You should expect a lot of visitors to your seaport, but keep in mind that it may bring its share of commotion. You might get some colorful characters. All good things have their cost, and while you will gain many things, you should assume you’ll lose as well. That being said, I have no intention of making you regret your decision to choose me. I merely ask that you do all that you can to do right by the people of this seaport.”

“Lord Cliff...”

“Once this tunnel is complete, the people will come. Until then, increase the number of guards you have, employ adventurers, and bolster public order. I will, of course, lend you money and people from our side. Just think of the toll as future capital to cover that.”

“Do you really think that many people will come?”

“I’m sure of it. If I *wasn’t* sure of it, that would put me in a tight spot.”

The old guys looked dubious, but Cliff had my vote.

I made the tunnel just for myself, barely giving it a second thought, but...the more Cliff talked about it, the more I thought about how many problems it might cause for the town. Word would spread, and people would flock to the quiet seaport, bringing trouble with them, for sure. Cliff already had plans for dealing with it. I didn’t know what else I expected from a lord who managed a town. He was looking one step ahead...or maybe he was just bothering to think before he acted.

“Milaine and I will give you the details of our plan. We’ll discuss what’s possible and what’s not the next time we talk.”

“Yes.” Atola and the old men nodded. Were things really okay? The old guy gang made me wonder, somehow.

“First, we’ll expand the seaport up to this tunnel.”

“Expand it?”

“It’s a considerable distance from here to the entrance of the seaport. We’ll clear the trees and install an outpost here. We can keep guard, then, over the people coming along the coastal road and from the tunnel simultaneously.

Stationing guards in two places would be a waste of money and personnel when those two points are so close.”

“I suppose we’d certainly need a guard in front of the tunnel,” an elder said.

“It would mean trouble if monsters or bandits set themselves up in there,” another mused.

“We also need inns and a place to park the carriages,” said Cliff, “so that’d kill two birds with one stone.”

“Inns?”

“People *will* come here and you *must* be prepared for it. You’ll need places for them to rest, places for their carriages, places for them to trade and perhaps places for them to settle. If that happens, clearing out land would help. Without doing so, I’m not sure you have the capacity.”

“Do you *really* think that many people will come?”

All right, gramps, haven’t you gone off about this already? Bunch of old dudes repeating the same thing, again and again, not listening to a word Cliff said.

“They *will* come!” said Cliff. “There’s no doubt about it—this won’t be a quiet town anymore. If you’re unhappy about that,” he added, giving me a meaningful look, “blame the bear for making the tunnel.”

Wow. Top ten all-time betrayals, and for what? I did nothing wrong.

“But,” Cliff continued, “this isn’t a bad thing. I have a rich future in mind for the seaport, for Crimonia and for Mileela.” And you know what? I could believe him. Guy had a good sense of direction. “We must keep pushing forward. If you come to a standstill, that’s where things end. Push forward and choose a good path.”

The old guy gang nodded along with that. “I suppose you’re right. Heh. Things do change quite a bit, don’t they? Sitting in a rut can get comfortable when your joints get old.”

“I trust that you wish the best for your seaport’s future. Please, choose to do what makes that possible.”

Now *that’s* a lordly kind of speech. Good on him.

“We should discuss how the tunnel will be used next. While it’s technically wide enough for two carriages to pass each other, as a fundamental rule I think we’ll alternate traffic by even and odd days. Any truly large carriages would block the tunnel, which would be a nightmare for everyone involved. We’ll both have to manage that together.”

“Right.”

“And, oh, we’ll need to regulate when the tunnel can be entered base on travel time and the like. Since we, ah, came through on the giant magical bears, we’re not *exactly* sure about travel times, but we can measure that and figure out when to cut off traffic at night.”

“What should we do if a carriage breaks down inside the tunnel?”

“You can just do a final pass through after you close off the tunnel entrance. It shouldn’t take much time if you use horses. If someone lost a wheel or some such thing, the person can make a report on it at the nearby outpost.”

“I suppose that would take care of things...”

“But we’re getting ahead of ourselves, aren’t we? No, we must install mana gems before anyone can travel through it. Please assume all of this is purely provisional. We’re sure to run into unforeseen problems as we put our plans into practice, so what I say is by no means absolute. If there’s anything unreasonable, inconvenient, or contradictory about what I’ve proposed, please tell me.” He paused for a moment. “I don’t know what I don’t know, and we all make mistakes.”

He’d grown so weirdly quiet there, like he was talking to himself...wait, was he? Was that about the orphanage? He’d come all the way to my house just to apologize after that mess.

A nobleman who recognized his mistakes, eh? A lot of the nobles I knew from novels and manga were pompous jerks who looked down on the population. Maybe they were just written that way to shake up the story, or maybe Cliff really was the exception. Either way, I much preferred nobles like Cliff.

“You look like you want to say something.” Cliff noticed me looking at him,

just the slightest of scowls on his face.

“You’re acting pretty lordly.”

“Because I *am* a lord!” said Cliff, giving my head a little poke.

Whoa, hold up, I wasn’t making fun of him. I tried to say something nice. What’d he do that for?

And onto the nittier, grittier details—Cliff explaining his thoughts, everyone chewing on them, sharing opinions and hashing stuff out. While everyone talked, I silently checked that our surroundings were safe. We had some pretty old dudes here, and I didn’t even want to think of how nasty a monster attack could be.

“I feel like we’ve covered the basics,” said Cliff finally. “Anything else, feel free to address later.”

Old man Kuro and the others came over to me a moment later. “Lass, thank you for everything. Subduing the bandits, slaying that kraken, and even bringing Lord Cliff to us? You’re a wonder, girl.”

“Ah, and thank you for making this tunnel so we can make contact with Crimonia! I cannot begin to express my gratitude—none of us can!”

“Really, our deepest thank yous.”

Argh, and now the old men were thanking me too? I couldn’t handle it. Too many people, too embarrassing, no thank you to all the thank yous. “Uh, well, I just slapped that tunnel together, so, you know what? Don’t worry about it.”

Cliff snorted—had he been listening in? “If a tunneling expert heard you saying you ‘slapped that tunnel together,’ he’d give you a piece of his mind.”

What?! I just said that so the old men would chill for just a few second, maybe even one second. I’d actually been *super deliberate* about making the tunnel. Big enough for carriages, taking elevation differences into account to make sure the inclines were smooth. If I’d just planned for slightly bigger carriages, it would’ve been a perfect example of tunneling excellence.

Okay, yes, I had absolutely gotten bored of the monotony partway through and made the rest of the tunnel while humming to myself.

“While we’re at it, lass,” one of the interchangeable old men added, “I’d like to ask you for a favor. Could you make a stone statue of a bear by the tunnel entrance?”

“A stone bear?” That seemed a little...sudden.

“Like the ones you left after defeating the kraken, you see. I’d like to make sure we do not forget to whom we should be grateful—the maker of this tunnel, and the slayer of monsters. We will not live forever, so we must make sure the future townspeople do not forget. Please, would you make us a bear statue?”

Uh, was he asking me to make a statue of a bear (representing yours truly) to make sure the bear (me, of all people) would go down in history forever? That seemed like an awful lot to ask.

“Right you are,” said Cliff, smiling ear-to-ear and nodding along. “I think that’s an excellent idea.” He *absolutely* enjoyed this. “Also, why don’t you go to the other entrance and put up a Yuna—I mean, a bear—there?”

No way. I definitely misheard him. Had he really equated me—human girl, in case you’re still wondering—to a bear? “You’re joking.”

The old guy gang looked dead serious.

“Also,” Cliff continued, smiling broadly, “the tunnel will need a name. I will christen it on the spot.”

Oh no. He *wouldn’t*.

“How do you like ‘Bear Tunnel?’”

I was pretty sure this was what you’d call a literal jaw-dropping remark.

“That’s a good name,” said the old men.

“Splendid.”

“We can express our gratitude to the young lass whenever we use the tunnel.”

“We shall pass it down for generations to come.”

“With a name like that, the townspeople will never forget it.”

Approval across the board for Cliff's name. I could only scream in horror: "STOOOOOP!"

Cliff shook his head. "Just leave it be. We would normally name these things after the discoverer. Would you rather we call it 'Yuna Tunnel?'"

No, I'd rather they call it a billion other things, but they wouldn't hear a single suggestion. Then I ended up making a statue of a bear that was about half my height in front of the tunnel with my own two paws. What a disgrace.

Fine, I could deal with it. As long as they, under no circumstances whatsoever, spread that I made the tunnel.

Chapter 103:

The Bear Goes to the Trade Guild

I STOOD BEFORE what was now “Bear Tunnel,” trying to grin and bear it through the humiliation. Man, Cliff’s smile made me wanna get back at him... and just then, I had an idea on how.

Yeah, I’d make a bear statue for him, all right. I gathered my mana and crafted a realistic bear in the middle of a ferocious roar, ready to tear some poor jerk to shreds. Very satisfying...until someone gave me a whack on the head.

“Ouch.”

A soft one, but come on!

“What do you think you’re making?”

“Why, it’s a bear, Cliff! Didn’t you want a bear?”

“Why did you make it look so ominous and scary?”

“To make you mad?” Another quick, light bonk. “In that case, what kind of bear am I supposed to make? Say ‘a statue of you’ and I walk out, by the way,” I said, rubbing my head.

“Make something like the ones at your shop, why don’t you? People love those little guys.”

Jeez, even Cliff found those chibi Nendoroid bears cute. They’d really taken off, even in Crimonia. Every once in a while, I’d spot kids coming to the shop and hugging them in delight.

“In that case,” said Milaine, “it would be nice to have it holding something, just like the bear at the shop.” (Fun fact: the bear in front of the shop bore a loaf of bread not just for the sake of holding something, but because the bear was a baker.) Cliff nodded. “Then how about swords? They’ll be like guardians of the tunnel.”

“Good idea, Cliff.”

They went on without me, the person who was actually doing the statue labor

thing. The old guy gang and Atola didn't know about my shop, so they just kept out of it and listened.

"But then wouldn't it also need a shield?"

"I think that'd just get in the way."

Cliff and Milaine finished their discussion, and we went with a cute bear like the one at the store, but with a neat sword. Now, I thought the bear could use a big ol' shield—*maybe* coincidentally too big—but that earned me another bonk on the head.

Weird. I thought it was a good idea. If it was going to be a guardian, then it'd definitely need a big shield to guard things, right? We ended up with a Nendoroid-style stone bear statue holding a sword by the tunnel entrance. The shield was rejected because it made it so you couldn't see the bear (which was a total coincidence).

"They're rather cute bears."

"Indeed..."

Atola and the old guy gang looked unsure as they inspected the statue.

"What is it? You don't like it?" And after all my hard work...

"No, it's not like that at all, just...the bear seems almost *too* cute. That said, I think it's better than the freaky one from earlier," said Atola, shaking her head. The old men agreed. No one really *objected*, at least, so boom: one Nendoroid-style stone bear holding a sword on the Mileela-side entrance of the tunnel, ready and done. And now...ugh, I'd see a bear every time I used the tunnel.

With the tunnel inspected and the bear statue erected, we returned to the seaport.

"What do you want to do next, Cliff?" asked Milaine. "I'd like to head over to the trade guild."

"Right. I'll need a lot of assistance from them—I'd better drop by too."

"No kidding—having the lord of Crimonia present would give me a whole lot

of leverage if I need it.”

“So about me...” I started. No way they could possibly need me for this one, right? Off I went, now...right?

“Of course, you’ll be accompanying us as well,” Cliff said, as though it was only obvious. “You have more clout than I do, after all.”

He must’ve been teasing again. No way a *bear* could have more political power than a lord.

“You’re right,” said Milaine. “Based on everything up until now, Yuna *would* have more pull.” C’mon, wouldn’t a lord be good enough?

As if reading my mind specifically to annoy me, even Atola butted in: “I think that having Yuna around would make discussions go a lot smoother.”

Political clout? Me? Ugh, I wanted to scream. Me? *Me?*

“I’ll have the carriages head to the trade guild,” Atola said, and the driver headed on out.

Yep, they won: I ended up following them to the trade guild, and all in the same carriages we’d come by.

“Atola,” I said, trying to change the subject “so about that plot of land...” I asked Atola for a plot of land where I could build a bear house. Since I was going to build a house in an ocean-side town, I wanted to make sure I had a nice view.

“I’ve found a few good options, so I thought you could choose your favorite.”

“About that...could I build my house in a place between the tunnel and the seaport, like Cliff mentioned earlier?” It wouldn’t stand out as much that way.

“That would be fine, but are you going to build it by yourself?” Atola mused. “I guess *you’d* be capable of that.” She’d seen the bear statue, after all, so she looked half-convinced.

“You’ll tire yourself out trying to follow along with her absurdity,” said Cliff. “She made a bear house overnight in my town. You can’t imagine the commotion.”

Oh, I guess I had, huh? It felt like forever ago, but I guess it was just a few months ago.

“A *bear* house?” Atola repeated.

“Every single one of the houses she makes is a bear house. She’s got one in the royal capital, and it’s just as bearish as the rest.”

I gave him a look. “How do you know about my house in the capital?”

“I saw it, obviously. Ellelaura howled with laughter when she got a look, let me tell you.”

Right, of course Cliff visited the capital, so of course he knew about that and my traveling bear house. Nothing to do but roll with it, I suppose.

“Cliff.”

“What is it?”

“About the house I’m building—can I put it anywhere? Do you have any ideas? I’ll hear you out.”

“None in particular. You can build it wherever you like, as long as you don’t block the road.”

I looked to Atola for final confirmation. “Yeah, fine by me. I’ll tell old man Kuro and the others.”

With permission from Cliff and Atola, I could put the bear house wherever I liked. I started staring out the carriage window right away, wondering where. Maybe...there? Or no, duh, this spot was way better? I noted a few of the candidates in my head and tried imagining it. That spot was closer to the tunnel, but far from the seaport. *That* one was close to the seaport, but far from the tunnel.

Ooo, but maybe *that* spot would work? It was close to the beach. All that bear house imagining made the trip go quick—before long, the carriage pulled up to the trade guild. We got off the carriage, and Jeremo and the old guy gang loaded off too. Atola led the lot of us inside.

“Atola? Has something happened to all of you?” The staff were surprised when Atola and the old man gang came in.

Atola looked around. “Is everyone here?”

“Uh, a few people are out,” one of the staff members answered after a brief check.

“Right. We’ve got enough. Would you listen carefully to what I’ve got to tell you? You can tell anyone who’s out when they return.”

The staff members stopped what they were doing and gathered around, listening.

“We all know what happened with the previous guild master, and we know that we need a new guild master right away. For this task, I would like to announce we have selected Jeremo.”

“You chose Jeremo?” The staff turned to look at him. Jeremo glanced at the exit.

“I apologize for making a unilateral decision about this,” said Atola, “but we needed to.”

“Not at all,” said one of the staff quickly. “Atola, if you and the elders have decided this, then we won’t object.” The others nodded along...

...or most of them did. “Are you sure the seaport branch is allowed to pick a guild master itself? Don’t we need to check in with the trade guild headquarters?”

“I’ll send them a report,” said Milaine, taking a step forward, “so there’s no need to worry.”

“Um, and you are?”

“I am Milaine, trade guild master of Crimonia. After hearing what Atola and the elders had to say, I decided to install him as the guild master. Of course, this is temporary, so if doesn’t seem to be a good fit in the end, I will have him step down.”

The staff seemed shocked by Milaine’s dramatic entrance. Can’t say I blame them—to these guys, she just came out of nowhere.

“Please note, too, that this seaport is now under the jurisdiction of Crimonia’s Lord Fochrosé and his family.”

The staff looked to Cliff, lord of Crimonia, and waves of shock ran through the crowd.

“But I thought we were nowhere near Crimonia?”

“That,” said Milaine with a smile, “is not a problem.” She explained that I had...“discovered” a tunnel that connected to Crimonia, and soon enough people would be able to commute between the towns.

The staff looked conflicted. Jeremo *had* become the new guild master out of nowhere, after all, and all because some foreign trade guild master and the lord of Crimonia himself popped in out of the blue to declare it. Drop on that a tunnel connecting to Crimonia being discovered just now, out of nowhere, and the future plans the two told them all for their seaport? It was their whole future, blurted out all at once, and it was a lot to process.

Oh, and me? I listened from an out-of-the-way chair I plopped myself down in. Did they even need me?

Sure, I didn’t mind in the end, coming all the way out to the trade guild, but Cliff and Milaine were all “Yuna asked us to come here,” and “The bear asked us to do this,” to the trade guild people. I hadn’t said a single word.

Jeremo came over to me, sighing as he did. “Cliff and Milaine are really something.”

There they were, giving detailed instructions to the trade guild. Hurray. “Are you sure you shouldn’t be over there listening in?”

“They told me what I need to do. Are you sure *you* should be hanging out in the corner like this?”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know, but Cliff and Milaine sure trust you.”

Did they? “We’ve got deep history.”

Things had started with the orphanage and Cliff. I refused to sell him the eggs, we cleared up that misunderstanding, and I escorted Noa to the capital. I’d even slayed ten thousand monsters to protect Cliff. When it came to Milaine, there was all the stuff with the kokekko eggs, and all her work to open Morin’s

shop. The two of them knew, too, that I defeated tigerwolves and a black viper.

Put it like that, and you could say that I was indebted to them. I'd helped them out, too, even if we hadn't known each other for long. So much had happened, and all so fast...

Nothing like this—no relationships like this—would've been forged back when I shut myself in my room, day in and day out.

It didn't take long for Cliff and Milaine to finish their explanations, and we all headed back to the inn. I couldn't stop myself from muttering to myself about whether there was any point in having me there, but...both everyone from Crimonia and everyone from Mileela told me, "Yes."

Because only I'd spent a lot of time in both towns, obviously. That was probably it.

As Cliff said: "They trust me because you're here."

Or, in the words of the geezer brigade: "We trusted Lord Cliff because you seemed to trust him."

Even the trade guild staff told me that they could trust anyone who was friends with the girl who saved the seaport. Which was some serious responsibility, right? If one side betrayed the other, wouldn't that become *my* responsibility? So weird. When had my life turned into this?

No one asked how I felt about it.

Chapter 104:

The Bear Builds a Bear House by the Seaport

WITH THE TRADE GUILD TALKS over, the staff generally took it well. I thought there'd be at least one complaint since they were suddenly becoming part of Crimonia's territory, but nope. Then again, maybe the changes came on so quick that they hadn't finished processing it.

With the day's work done, I headed back to the inn. I hadn't done anything, but it was still a tiring day.

"You look pooped, Yuna," said Anz, ready with a piping hot plate of grub. Cliff and Milaine were making a stop at the adventurers' guild, so I was on my own.

"I had to deal with some...annoyances." Bear statues by the tunnel? *Really?* "Come to think of it, do you remember our promise?"

"We had a promise?"

"About how you'd come to Crimonia and become a cook at my shop." No way. Anz had to remember—I made an entire tunnel. I had to bear the shame of making bear statues for her.

"Um. You were serious?"

"Yep. You can do what you want with the shop, so I want you to come with me. I'd provide you with a salary, of course."

"But...okay, where would I live?"

"So you'd come with me if you had a place to live?"

"But...okay, if I went, I wouldn't be able to cook anything without access to fish!"

"So...you'd come with me if you could get fish in Crimonia?"

"But...okay, even so, I'd want to be able to visit Mom and Dad!"

“So...you’d come with me if you could get home immediately whenever you needed?” I gave her a long look.

“Are you really, actually serious?”

“All that and more, with an all-year-warranty and a money-back guarantee.”

“A...war and tea?” She frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Well, I thought it was cute, but...fantasy world, right. And in the middle of all this stammering and confusion came Deigha.

“Heya, Deigha. I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I’d ask for Anz’s hand in marriage, pretty please?”

Deigha blinked. “Wh-Wh...really? Anz, do you—if you—”

“Ms. Yuna, please stop joking around!”

Deigha coughed, glanced at a patch of floor. “Ah. It was just a joke, then?”

“I wasn’t actually proposing to her, but we *were* talking about whether Anz could come to Crimonia with me.”

“Crimonia?”

“Anz said she wants to set up a business of her own someday. I’ll cover the costs, so I hoped she’d set up shop with me.”

“Really?” Deigha looked to Anz for confirmation.

“Yuna’s joking,” said Anz uncertainly.

“Not at all.”

“But even if you take Anz there, it would be pointless if you can’t get seafood.”

“Anz said the same thing to me. So I asked Anz to promise me that she’d come to Crimonia if I could guarantee fresh fish, seafood deliveries, and that she could come back to visit the seaport at any time.”

“Is this true, Anz?”

“I-It is,” Anz admitted, “but all of that is impossible.”

“Mmhm, but what if it wasn’t? Would you allow Anz to come to Crimonia,

Deigha?”

“If Anz says she wants to go with you,” said Deigha, “then of course I offer my blessing. For, ah, the business.”

“You promise?”

“Stop making decisions without me!” Anz groaned, but it was too late: I’d already gotten a commitment from Deigha. Now I just needed to wait for Cliff to finish the tunnel and then Anz and I would be off! (For the business.)

My bears woke me the next day. Since I hugged Kumakyu while I slept last night, my bear was in a good mood. I sent them back and had breakfast by myself.

Cliff and Milaine had already left. I was off the hook for today, they said, so I was going to build my house. If things went according to our discussions yesterday, development would start on the land between the seaport and the tunnel soon enough...and they’d all take up the good spots. Since I’d already gotten permission to build a house wherever I pleased, I wanted to grab a nice spot for myself while I still could. I headed out to the spot that I marked yesterday quick as I could.

“I’m pretty sure it was somewhere over there...”

Just riding on Kumayuru to the spot, not *really* needing the map, just...you know, having it up just in case.

The beautiful ocean and beach stretched out before me. The spot slightly sloped—if I built the house at the top, I was sure to get a nice view. Oh, and I could install some parasols on the balcony and rooftop for a leisurely siesta! I’d have a great view of the stars at night for sure. This spot was the best place for an ocean view. It’d be super conspicuous, but it wasn’t like I had a better location in mind and I wasn’t trying to hide it this time, so...why not?

I planned on making this house even bigger than the one in Crimonia; I wanted to bring the orphans, the headmistress, Liz, and (of course) Morin and

Karin with me to see the ocean. A beach house vacation, so to speak!

Sure, we could have stayed at Deigha's inn, but Cliff and Milaine said that this place was sure to become crowded real soon. I could have made reservations, but I didn't want the kids to be a nuisance for Deigha and the rest.

All right, here we go: a bear house beach house!

So, uh.

Erm...how many orphans were there again? There were more girls, I was pretty sure of that.

When I rebuilt the orphanage a while ago and checked in with the headmistress, there'd been twelve boys and fifteen girls for a total of twenty-seven kids. There had been twenty-three kids when I first visited the orphanage, which meant the count had gone up by four.

Jeez, that's a lot of kids. Must've been hard for the headmistress and Liz to look after twenty-seven young children, and for Liz to manage the kokekko on top of that. Knowing the headmistress, she was sure to take in any new orphans who showed up.

Yikes. Maybe I'd talk to the headmistress about hiring more staff. If anything happened to those two, we'd have an orphan crisis on our hands, which is *not* a good crisis to have.

Future Yuna could worry about that one. Present Yuna had a bear house to present as a present for the future orphans—if I presented Deigha with the orphans (present *or* future) he surely couldn't accommodate them all.

I had to level the ground before anything else; this time I planned to make a largish house, so I wasn't sure how much mana that would use up. I made an instant changing booth with earth magic to switch into my white bear mode. I already confirmed in the tunnel, after all, that wearing my white bear onesie would reduce magical fatigue.

As soon as I changed into the white bear clothes, I got to work toppling the trees in front of me with wind magic, and pulling up the roots with earth magic. I pruned the timber, put it away into my bear storage, and bam: I set up a small clearing, plenty wide enough to build a bear house.

Maybe *too* wide. “Maybe I overdid it?” Ehh, it’d be the right size if I threw in a storehouse.

After that, I gathered earth to make an elevated section in the clearing. I wanted the bear house to feel like it was on top of a hill. I used earth magic for the foundation and then, using wind magic, I processed the timber I collected. Kumayuru and Kumakyu carried the processed lumber to erect pillars, which I fixed in place using earth magic—I mean, I’m no carpenter.

The way I made houses was, fundamentally, based on my imagination. First, I pictured the bear exterior, because bear stuff strengthened the magic. Even if monsters or robbers attacked, I could rest easy.

My bear house in Crimonia and my travel bear house were sitting bears, but since this was going to be a four-story house, I made standing bears. From there, I made a second bear house (attached on the first floor) to keep the boys and girls separate. Two large bear houses standing right next to each other—boys on the left, girls on the right.

On the first floor, I made the dining room and kitchen. Stairs led to the second floor right in the middle, into large rooms on the second story of each bear. Girls’ room on the right, boys on the left. That way, if they slept on the floor together side by side, it would all be large enough for any more kids. Again, knowing the headmistress, she would definitely take in an orphan if she found one.

Next I made the third floor, which consisted of my room and some guest rooms, probably to be used by the headmistress, Liz, or Tiermina. After that, a few overflow rooms in case we got more orphans.

Finally, one small room next to my own: this was where I’d make a Bear Transport Gate.

Once the layout was more or less done, I went up to the fourth floor to make the baths. Boys on the left, girls on the right, with some carefully placed windows for the bathers to look out at the scenery if they wanted.

And once *that* was done, the next step was addressing that strange, tiny rumbling. A...tummy? Oh. Right, *my* tummy. I mean, I was the only one here. It was the exact right time for lunch. I could have gone back to Deigha's, but that sounded like a pain. I opened my bear storage and wolfed down some bread Morin made.

Ooo, soft and delicious like it came straight from the oven. Perfect to munch on while looking out the third floor at all that beautiful scenery. The ocean, the cliff, the tasty bread, and...was that Milaine?

Weird. I jumped out the window to check.

"Y-Yuna? Don't scare me like that!" Milaine sounded so shocked.

"Yep. What's up?"

"I took the guild staff to the tunnel. Since I spotted the bear house after that, I came to take a look." Milaine gazed up at the bear house. "Very large, isn't it?"

"I'm thinking of bringing the orphans with me next time I come, so I kept it on the bigger side."

"May I take a peek?"

I shrugged. "I've only done the room layout and exterior."

"Normal people wouldn't finish those things in this amount of time."

Ehh. I led Milaine into the bear house.

"What are you going to do for furniture?" she asked.

"I'll buy some when I head back to Crimonia. I also have to get bedding."

"Ha! That's not a problem. I can arrange for those at the trade guild."

"Nah, don't worry. I can buy it myself. Besides, you must be busy." If she wasn't now, she would be soon enough. She wouldn't have time to worry about my bear house's furniture.

Milaine snorted. "I'm trying to avoid reality right now. It's going to be pandemonium once I get back to Crimonia. My checklists have checklists."

“Go get ’em, tiger.”

“Yuna, you’re acting like you have nothing to do with this.”

I mean, I *didn’t* have anything to do with this? I’d done my part. Kraken dead, bandits down, tunnel dug, bear statue...beared. Any normal person would have had a terrible time trying to accomplish all of that, and I told her so.

“I know that,” she said. “This is my job, and Cliff’s, but we’ll have to get Ralock’s help.”

“Who’s Ralock?” It was familiar, but not *too* familiar.

“You know, Ralock? The guild master of Crimonia’s adventurers’ guild.”

Ah, Ralock. I’d heard Sanya, the adventurers’ guild master at the capital, drop that name once. I’d only heard it that one time and always called him by his title, so I guess I’d forgotten.

“First off,” said Milaine, “we need to clear out the monsters from the surrounding area. Then we have to bring in craftsmen, fell the trees, make a road, and set up an outpost in front of the tunnel. We’ve got our work cut out for us.”

For real.

“But seeing you in your incredibly cute outfit,” said Milaine with a smile, “has positively filled me with determination.”

Right, yeah. Looking out at the scenery from the third story refreshed her spirit, then. She thanked me and headed back to the seaport.

Huh. Was it just my imagination, or was Milaine looking at me a little differently from normal? Eh, who could say. I had a bear house to make.

I worked to install the mana gems before dark, starting with light mana gems in the ceiling and mana lines to connect them. Since installing the mana gems had to be done by hand, it took some time. But when you plugged the mana lines to the light mana gems, boom: a nice, well-lit room. Simple enough work that anyone could do it.

After I finished installing light mana gems in every room, I set up the necessities. The first floor needed a dining room and the kitchen, so I made a note to buy tables and chairs. As for the oven, I just made it out of stone. It might be nice if everyone made bread together, you know?

Next, I pulled out a spare shelf from my bear storage (you never know when those can come in handy) and filled it with plates, cups, forks, spoons, and other necessary stuff. I already bought a lot of these things in bulk so I could make a new bear house whenever I needed one. I'd buy anything I was missing in Crimonia later.

The second floor was made up of only two large rooms, and all I really needed was some bedding and pillows. I didn't have enough bedding for all the orphans, but I'd pick 'em up on my shopping trip.

The third floor had my room and a couple of guest rooms. I made my bed with magic, sure to keep it on the larger side for my fuzzy little guys. Next, spare bedding from my bear storage—extra large, per my usual bear house requirements. Big blankets also kept my bears from sleeping on top of *me*, which wasn't ideal.

Spare tables and chairs for the guest rooms, and...done.

Fourth floor, baths. Some shelves for the changing rooms were easy enough, and a few fire and water gems kept the water nice and warm. Stools and buckets for the baths, maybe baskets to put clothes into, and there we go: it felt like a small bathhouse. Maybe I'd add doorway curtains like a bathhouse, too?

Since the inside of the bear house was pretty much done, I started making the yard—maybe I'd end up using the storehouse/shed for harvesting monsters or maybe not, but I wanted one just in case. I decided the rough size of the yard and enclosed it with two-meter-ish walls. Behold, my land. A *lot* of land, now that I thought about it, but ehh. Probably no big deal.

To finish things off, I placed small stone cub statues above the gate like Okinawan shisa. Just a couple cute little guardians.

Okay, maybe I *did* like bears a little bit. I mean, I love Kumayuru and Kumakyu for sure, but...that freaking bear onesie, though? Nope, still embarrassing.

And with that, my largish bear house was finished and furnished with the bare necessities. From the outside, the house looked like two bears standing side by side. I'd really made a huge, four-story house, hadn't I?

Yep, there it was: the fifth bear house.

The first was in Crimonia, the second inside a cave near the kokekko village (though I didn't use it), the third traveled with me, the fourth was in the capital, and now we had this fifth.

Not only were my bear houses way stronger than normal houses, but also they were secured using my mana. Only people who had my permission could enter the bear houses. Even if I wasn't there, no one could break in. There wouldn't be much to steal if they did, I guess, but I still wasn't about to let any thief waltz right in.

Through the third-floor window I saw the setting sun over the ocean. Suddenly hungry, and more than a little surprised that so much time had passed, I locked up and ran back to the inn for more of Deigha's cooking.



Chapter 105:

The Bear Runs Many Errands Before Heading Home

THE SEAPORT GATEKEEPER at the entrance gave me the weirdest look when he saw me. Well, whatever—I just showed him my guild card and headed inside. He wasn't the usual person, so maybe it was his first time seeing me?

But...as I headed to the inn, I noticed the townspeople *also* giving me the same looks. No one said a word.

Okay, so the weirdness was on everyone, then, because they'd definitely say something to me if everything was normal. Had something happened? I walked a little faster toward the inn.

When I got back there, I found Cliff in the middle of his meal. I ran over to him at once.

"Cliff, there's something up with the seaport. Did anything happen?"

"Oh, I guess there *was* something."

I knew it—something *was* up. Cliff gave me a dead serious look.

"What was it?"

"A black bear turned into a white bear," he said, still completely serious.

A black bear turned into a—wait. I looked down at my onesie. Oops.

"So you've got a white version of that too, huh?"

"Gyaaaaaaaaahh!" When all else fails, scream and run away. I did just that, rushed up to my second floor room and changed into my black bear clothes. Ugh, I know it was just a different color, but it felt so...so embarrassing!

I'm sure I just hadn't gotten used to wearing them in front of others, but the white clothes made me bashful. Why? Well, I kinda used them as pajamas, right? And so it *felt* like I was wearing PJs in public, even though they were exactly the same other than the color.

It still must've been weird for the townspeople, though. Milaine hadn't said anything about it, but then again...maybe she'd been looking at me oddly

because I'd been wearing the white bear onesie.

I headed back to Cliff. "Are you the only one here? Is Milaine around?"

"She hasn't come back yet. How's your house shaping up?"

"You knew about that?"

"I bumped into Milaine and she told me."

"I guess it's mostly done. I need to set up the inside, but I'm going to buy everything I need once I get back to Crimonia, so I'm done with things here for now."

"I know there's hardly a point in saying these things with you, but any normal person wouldn't be able to build a house in just a day or two," he said with a laugh. He was joking, but...well, he wasn't wrong, was he? I let that wash over me and ordered a meal from Deigha.

"So, Cliffy, what've you been up to?"

"Well, we've set up an official announcement tomorrow morning—that's where I'll tell them about the tunnel and that the seaport is joining my territory. Then we start recruiting workers to level that area. We decided the wages for that particular project today. Tricky business...if we don't pay enough, we won't get any takers, but if we pay too much, we'll strain our economy."

Of course, I knew nothing about that kind of stuff. Market prices and wages and recruiting...great, cool, but nothing I could do anything about. "Will things be okay?"

"We're going to take the materials they have from the kraken, so we should pretty much be fine now."

"You're taking the kraken?"

"Yes—you donated the kraken parts to the seaport, did you not?"

"Sure I did, I didn't need them."

Cliff rubbed his temples. "Yuna. *Yuna*. How much do you think kraken parts sell for?"

(Ugh, here he was getting worked up again just because I didn't know what he knew...)

"Kraken hide," he said, "is some of the best waterproof material you can get, and it alone sells for a fortune. You can even sell the meat for a high price. And you parted with it all for...nothing."

"It helps the seaport get back on its feet, right? That doesn't sound like nothing."

"You really are an odd one. No normal person would donate something like that. You were the one to save them...and it would've been perfectly reasonable to ask them to pay you back." Cliff sighed, but he smiled.

"I gave it to them so they could rebuild, so I'm fine with it as long as you use it for a good purpose."

"Of course I will. I'll sell it for a high price and use those funds to service the tunnel. More money always helps."

Once we finished talking, Anz came in with my food. Cliff finished eating, so he was taking it easy and sipping his tea...and just as I finally started to dig in, Milaine came back.

"Oh, Yuna, you're already having dinner? Are you still waiting to get yours, Cliff?"

"I've finished mine."

"You did? Hmph. So I'm last?" Milaine called in the back for Deigha, who got to work on her meal at once.

"So, how did things work out for you?" Cliff asked.

"It's a small trade guild to begin with, but now four of them are in jail, the guild master included. We're going to be real shorthanded as it is, and then add the huge influx of travelers..." She shook her head.

"Shorthanded is the right word. We still don't have a mayor, and we'll need to really look for some advisers when a mayor's chosen."

"Did our runaway mayor not have any?"

“No, they kept everything within their family and friends before running out with all their assets.”

Yep, sounded like a run-of-the-mill family operation. The first leader would be great, but the second and third and every new generation would do a slightly worse job.

Cliff took a long sip of his tea, sighed. “At least you’ve still got people around, Milaine. I’m stuck in a situation where I have to rely on the adventurers’ guild and the three elders for everything.”

“Sounds tough.”

“Personally, it’d take a burden off of me if Atola would become the mayor, but then we wouldn’t have anyone running the adventurers’ guild. Which means I’ll have to consult Crimonia’s adventurers’ guild...” he waved his hand in a vague circle.

“Looks like the only option we’ve got is to bring people over from Crimonia right away.”

“And train them.”

Looks like those two had their work cut out for them.

I ate while listening in, pretending to myself that I had nothing to do with the whole affair.

“If I’m going to solve that trade guild issue, Cliff, I’ll need to go back to Crimonia right away. When are you planning on heading back?”

“I’ve got my normal work to do and the guild master issue I mentioned earlier, so we’re looking at around the day after tomorrow, if possible.”

“Works for me. Crimonia it is, if we want to seal the deal on these things. Are you fine with that too, Yuna?”

Of course I was—I needed furniture for my bear house. “Fine by me.”

The next day, I went out early in the morning on my own after Kumayuru and Kumakyu woke me up, heading out to the harbor. There were things related to

seafood that I wanted to ask Yuula and Damon for. I'd come looking for them here, but the ships were out at sea and they sure weren't at the harbor.

I was there too early, then. I decided to kill time watching the ocean. I wandered the harbor and watched as, one by one, boats returned to shore from the gleaming water. All of them were carrying tons of fish, and every fisherman smiled. I'd defeated the kraken, and I'd brought all of this back. It felt good.

While I watched all the fishers return, someone called out to me: "Bear girl, what are you doing at the harbor so early in the morning?"

"I'm going back to Crimonia tomorrow, so I wanted to say bye to Yuula and Damon. Maybe buy some seafood for the road, too." That's right, that was the main reason—couldn't *not* buy seafood before going back to Crimonia.

"What? You're heading back already?"

The fisher looked glum.

"That's why I came here in the first place, remember? To buy fish?" But then that kraken splashed around and got in the way...

"You did? In that case, you can take as much of our catch today with you as you'd like. It's a token of my appreciation." The fisher spread an arm out and gestured at the fish onboard the ship...and the other fishers joined in.

"Wait a sec. If you're going to take anything, take my fish."

"No, mine are much tastier."

"How'd you like some octopus?"

"I have giant shellfish over here."

And so the competition to sell me their fish began. All of it had just been caught, though, so I'm sure everything was fresh and delectable.

"Yuna, what's wrong?" And there came Yuula and Damon from behind the fishers, interrupting my hemming and hawing.

"I came by to see you two since I'm leaving tomorrow morning. I also came by to purchase some fine, fresh fish from these guys right here."

“In that case, take the fish I caught. Of course, we won’t take your money. You’ve helped us out time and again, after all.” Damon said that, and the people around him went into an uproar.

“Oi, Damon! You can’t come strutting in here from behind us all backstabbin’ and say that. We want the bear girl to take our wares too. You weren’t the only one she saved. We’re all grateful to her for being able to even catch fish like this. This is a chance to return the favor, if only a bit.”

“That’s right. And the elders told us we can’t go near her ’cause we’ll cause her trouble!”

The old guy gang had forbidden them from doing that for my sake?

Damon frowned. “But she also saved us while we were on the mountain in the snow.”

“That’s got no bearings here.”

“That’s right. You’re not the only one who wants to thank her.”

“All the fishers here want to show our gratitude toward the bear girl.”

Was this going to be a whole thing? In times like these, I guess you were supposed to strike a dramatic pose and tell all of them, “Stop it! Please don’t fight over me!” I mean, if you were a slave to tropes and couldn’t read a room.

“Umm,” I said, and cleared my throat lightly. “If you could all calm down, I’d be happy to pay a fair price if you’d be willing to let me have some of your fish.”

“We won’t take any money from you, bear girl!”

“That’s right. Right! It wouldn’t be a thank you gift if you paid us.”

“We’re trying to show you how grateful we are, so please just accept it.”

“No can do. I’ve got to put my foot down right now or I’ll have a hard time trying to buy your fish later.”

“I’d give ’em for free later, too, bear girl!”

“Nope. I’ve got a restaurant at Crimonia. I’m opening up a seafood business real soon, and I’d like to regularly buy seafood, so I can’t just take it for free.”

Sure, once or twice would have been fine, but once I took Anz with me, we’d

need to stock up regularly. If I wanted to keep up friendly relations with the fishers, my first interaction with them would be crucial.

“All right...” said a fisher, kicking his foot a little into the air like a petulant kid. “You can buy it next time, but *this* time you’ve got to take the fish for free.”

Looking at the fishers, I could tell that they wouldn’t back down on that one point. So...fine, just for today, but they’d have to promise to let me buy the fish off of them next time.

“And let us know if anything happens! We’ll do anything you need, bear girl.” The other fishers nodded. Way to put me on the spot, guys, but...then again, it did give me an idea.

“Then can I ask you for a favor?”

“What is it?”

“The lord of Crimonia is here right now, talking to the old men about the future of the seaport. It’d be nice if you all could refrain from arguing with them about what they hash out.” There might be a lot of unexpected issues from merging with Crimonia. I didn’t want them to get into arguments over it.

“We wouldn’t object to anything the elders decide as it is, but *especially* if the girl who saved the seaport says so. You’ve got it.” Did they really trust me that much? Was it all right for them to?

It made me feel a little uneasy, but this was better than some ridiculous fight over me. Now I just needed Cliff to do his part right. I prayed that he’d progress trade talks amicably...and then I grabbed my heaps of fresh seafood from everyone and left the harbor.

Next I headed to the trade guild. I needed something from Jeremo.

When I got to the guild, the staff were as busy as always. Work ramped up like Milaine said—lots of the staff had been arrested over the earlier crimes, so there was a lot to do and not as many people to do it.

But Milaine was right in the thick of it giving orders, a fine example of a guild master.

“Milaine, you sure look busy.”

“Oh, Yuna, what brings you here? You haven’t come to lend a hand, have you?”

“Me? I don’t know anything about this stuff.”

“Nonsense, just you being here helps. Accompany me, and that should be enough.”

The hard work of...standing behind her?

“I’m *kidding*, Yuna. What do you need?”

“I had something I wanted to ask Jeremo. Is he around?”

“He’s buried in work in the back room.”

“Does that mean I can’t see him?”

“Hmph. I suppose we *do* need to give him breaks so he doesn’t simply collapse. You can see him if he wants a break.”

Good enough for me. I headed over to the back room with Milaine.

“We’re coming in!” Milaine went right in without so much as a knock.

“Milaine?! I-I’m definitely working. Not slacking off at all here.” Jeremo mumbled, shuffling four stacks of paper into one and clearing his throat.

“I was thinking of giving you a break soon, but looks like you don’t need one.”

“What? Of course I need one. I’m so tired.”

“Ahh, well then...you can pause your current work and talk to Yuna instead.”

“She needs something?”

“Looks like she wants to ask you something. I need to go now—plenty to do out there—but once you’re done, it’s back to work.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

When Milaine shut the door, Jeremo let out a huge sigh. Looked like working with Milaine was a real experience.

“So, miss, what did you need to talk to me about?”

“It’s about the Land of Wa. I wanted to ask you for something.”

“The Land of Wa?”

“Yeah. There’s something I’d like you to buy the next time a ship comes from the Land of Wa.”

“I could try, but we don’t know *when* a ship will come. We haven’t seen a single one of theirs since the kraken appeared.”

“Why do they have to come to you? You can’t go over to them?”

“Impossible. We don’t have any vessels large enough for those waters, not here in the seaport.”

Oh...they didn’t.

No rice, no soy sauce, and definitely no miso. I fought off a whole kraken, but...then...what was I fighting *for*? Very cool for the seaport to be at peace now, yada yada yada, but still. Sucks!

“As a seaport, we relied on them for a huge portion of our food. For the time being, we’re able to buy food from Crimonia thanks to you, so we’ll be fine, but there are a lot of folks here who like Land of Wa’s cuisine, so we’ll be in trouble if they don’t come by.”

Right. Them and a bear girl too.

“Once they know the kraken is gone,” Jeremo continued, “there’s a chance they’ll come. All we can do is wait and see.”

“Can you buy me some stuff, though? If they do come by?” I placed a bag filled with money on top of his desk. “Please buy rice, soy sauce, and miso with this. And really just whatever food you can get from ’em. Don’t forget their seasonings, though, you gotta have the seasonings.”

“Miss, don’t you think this is a hefty sum?” Jeremo seemed shocked after looking into the leather bag. Hefty as the bag was, it was a low price to pay for me if I could buy rice, soy sauce, and miso.

“Oh, and rare stuff—if you see anything that looks especially rare, make sure to get that too, could you?”

“Miss, that’s a *lot* of money. Aren’t you worried I might steal your money?”

“I don’t know you that well, but Yuula, Damon, Atola, and the old men trust you. If they’re wrong, I’ll just resign myself to assuming none of them are great judges of character.”

“Ha ha! So it’s not that you trust me, but the people who trust me.”

“I guess? I mean, I’ve just only met you recently.”

“Got it. I’ll take good care of your money. Take a look—these are the transaction records from their last visit.” He showed me the documents in question. Yep...rice, soy sauce, and miso. “Next time they come by, things might be slightly more expensive. What would you like me to do if that happens?”

“I don’t care if it’s marked up double or triple the amount, I’ll buy it.”

“Fine by me. What should I do once I buy everything?”

“Just send it to Crimonia’s trade guild.”

From here on out, the two trade guilds would be closely connected. In that case, it would be easier to send communications through Crimonia’s trade guild. I wrapped up a few last assurances and checks and left the room for the last step in my plan: Hope and pray for ships from the Land of Wa.

Chapter 106:

The Bear Goes Back to Crimonia

I ASKED JEREMO for my Land of Wa favor, but it was still a bit of a bummer. I mean, we had no clue when they'd come here. I'd boiled a kraken. Surely that was worth a little miso soup, right?

After leaving the trade guild, I decided to explore the seaport. Milaine caught me as I left and had me help her out with greeting all the visitors (by standing quietly behind her). I somehow escaped from Milaine's clutches, only to be seized by Cliff and forced to greet even *more* people (which was easy, because I just had to stand quietly behind him).

Then, once I also escaped from Cliff's clutches, there were no more clutches for the day. Just a nice afternoon of exploring the seaport and heading back to the inn on my own. When I got back, it was dinnertime.

"Deigha, Anz, could I get dinner?!" They were in the back when I got to the inn, so I ordered and sat down in my usual seat.

Deigha rushed out from the back in a huge clatter. "You're back, miss?"

"Yep. Could I get dinner?"

"I've got something more important to ask you."

"More important than dinner?" C'mon, I was hungry...

"Were you serious about what you said earlier?"

"I say a lot of stuff."

"About Anz."

"Oh, you mean about having Anz come work at my shop?"

"That's right. I heard about the tunnel today."

"Oh..." Cliff and Milaine obviously knew about the tunnel, along with the adventurers' guild and trade guild. It spread out from all those workers to the people who *knew* those workers, and yesterday Milaine brought everyone involved with fixing up the tunnel to check it out.

“There’s been talk around the seaport about it. Some folks even went out to see it themselves. Miss, you said all those things the day before yesterday because you already knew, didn’t you?”

“Well, I really want Anz to come with me.”

“Miss, you...you didn’t *make* that tunnel, did you?”

Hmm. I could tell him, but...should I? Deigha looked so seriously at me, so I decided to go with the truth this time.

“I made it because I want Anz to come to Crimonia.”

“I knew it,” he said with a nod.

“And that’s important, it really is, but what I *really* wanted was to get seafood flowing into Crimonia.” I mean, if I didn’t have a distribution source for seafood, there was no *point* in having Anz come with me.

“Hold on, you dug a tunnel all the way to Crimonia just for that?”

“Yep. And you wouldn’t happen to know if the Land of Wa came in with their food, too, over the last couple hours, would you? That’d be awesome.”

“Haven’t heard a thing, no.” Man, still? “You really are something, miss. A whole lotta power in a half-pint size.” Deigha placed his whopping hand on my head. “But I do just wanna be sure, here: are you really sure you want Anz?”

I nodded.

“And you’re going to prep a shop for her?”

I nodded. “That, plus a salary and holidays so she’ll be able to come back to Mileela whenever she wants.” That was my promise to Anz, after all.

“Seems like a sweet deal, but what’s in it for you?”

“Isn’t that obvious? I get to eat seafood that Anz learned to prep from the great cook Deigha himself. That’s enough, isn’t it?”

“You really aren’t joking, then?”

“Would I dig a whole tunnel as a joke?”

Deigha rubbed his chin and closed his eyes. “You know what?” he said

thoughtfully. “That’s all right by me. Take Anz.”

“Are you sure?” Promise or no, we hadn’t *quite* gotten her permission yet.

“I know Anz wants her own business. Plus, I can rest easy knowing she’s with you. You want Anz so much, you’ve dug up an entire tunnel for the girl, haven’t you? That’s dedication. I don’t think I could stop ya even if I wanted to.”

“Thank you so much, Deigha. I’ll take good care of her.”

“Keep her happy for me, in sickness or health, ya hear?”

“Okay, now it really *does* sound like she’s marrying me.” We both burst out laughing.

“Anz! Come here for a sec!” Deigha yelled into the back.

“What? Dad?” Anz popped out from the back room.

“Do you want to go to Crimonia?”

“Even if I did, I don’t have the time to travel that far. And I don’t want to be so far away from you and Mom, I’d feel all alone...”

“Ah, but what if Crimonia were closer? Say, a few days’ journey?”

“I suppose that’d be different. Yeah, I’d go.”

There we go.

“Then go ahead,” said Deigha. Of course he’d be putting Anz on the spot by just suddenly telling her to “go ahead.”

“Dad?”

“The rumor’s already been spreading, so I’m sure you’ve already heard. They’ve made a tunnel connecting Mileela to Crimonia.”

Which sounded a lot more direct than it was, but meh—close enough.

“Dad, what’re you saying?” She grinned now, sure it was a joke. “Just a maaaaagical tunnel that we only all just heard of. Whatever you say.”

“You’d think so, but I heard about the tunnel from the elders just now. Folks have seen it. And the person who *made* that tunnel is right here with us...and she made it in order to get you to Crimonia.”

“You’re joking,” Anz repeated, sounding a little less sure of that.

“You promised, didn’t you? That you’d come to Crimonia if it were possible to get seafood and if you could see your parents any time.”

“I did...” It had been, like, yesterday. Would’ve been wild if she’d forgotten somehow. “Dad...?” Anz gave her dad an uncertain look. It looked like she never would have thought this would happen in her dreams, which...makes sense, in pretty much any normal situation.

“Anz, you decide on your own. This is your life.”

“D-Dad...” Anz gazed into my eyes. “Ms. Yuna, are you sure you want me?”

“I do. Would you, um, share your cooking with me?” I asked. *Now* it felt like a proposal. Eep.

“I-I see. If you’re really fine with me, then I’ll work hard for you.” And I guess that was that—Anz was going to Crimonia.

“Um, are you really sure about this?” I asked, feeling a little embarrassed.

“Yes! I look forward to working for you.”

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it too.” I’d gotten myself a cook.

Deigha looked sullen now. “Ahh, I never would have imagined that you’d leave before you even got married.”

“Then do you want to come over to Crimonia too, Deigha? I’ll make an inn just for you.” Yeah, why not?

“Your invitation fills me with joy, but I can’t. This place is in my bones; I was born and raised here, and someday I’ll die here.” Now he was just trying to sound cool.

“You should still come hang out in Crimonia. I’ll give you a big welcome when you come.”

Deigha put his hand on my head. “Yeah, I’ll be counting on you for a warm reception when the time comes.”

And in the middle of this sappy moment, a guy’s voice...“Sorry for putting a damper on your parade, but the tunnel won’t be usable for some time.”

And a girl's voice... "Right, since there's a mountain of work that needs to be done for it."

"Cliff and Milaine?"

How long had they been there? They inserted themselves into the conversation without saying a word.

Cliff took a seat at the table where I was. "I'm famished. Sir, could I get a meal?"

"One for me as well," said Milaine, sitting down beside him.

"Coming up. Hey, I hear tell that you two are Crimonia's lord and trade guild's master."

"Yuna's friend, first and foremost—Cliff Fochrosé, lord of Crimonia."

"And I'm Yuna's friend, Milaine. I do happen to be the guild master for Crimonia's trade guild."

"Crimonia's lord and guild master..." Deigha glanced around helplessly.

"You needn't fret that much," said Cliff. "We can just be Yuna's friends while here. Now please, sir, we would love one of your delicious meals."

Deigha looked positively ecstatic. "Anz! We're redoing your training until the tunnel's complete. Help me prep the food!"

"Okay!"

The two of them practically ran to the kitchen.

Cliff chuckled. "Yuna, you seem to have gotten a great cook for yourself."

"Right? You should come by to eat once we get the business going."

"Yes, I'll stop by."

"And you know I'll come by too, Yuna."

Now *that's* how you do it: hadn't even started up my business, and here I was with a pair of regulars.

We headed back to Crimonia the next morning, just as scheduled.

“Ms. Yuna, I’m going to study my heart out,” said Anz.

“Good, I’ll be waiting for you.”

Deigha nodded. “I’m going to give her a thorough education up until the tunnel is finished. All Crimonia’s got to know just how good our family meals are, eh?” Deigha gave Anz a firm pat on the head.

“Oww, Dad, come on!”

Deigha smiled but he didn’t take his hand off. I think he wanted to enjoy the head pats while he could still get them.

Atola and Jeremo waited for us outside of the inn.

“Yuna, thanks for everything,” said Atola. “When we first met, I was surprised a cute little girl in a bear outfit had wandered into the adventurers’ guild. I never would have imagined that things would turn out like this.”

Jeremo nodded. “Me too. It’s been a real ride.”

Wow. I’d really fought a kraken, hadn’t I? I wouldn’t have imagined doing that, not in my wildest dreams.

“Come by again anytime you like,” said Atola.

“I will. I’ve got a house here, after all.”

“You mean that bear one?”

“Yep. That’s my property,” I added, “so you better all keep away.”

Atola grinned. “I got it. I’ll let the townspeople know.”

While I said my goodbyes to Atola, Jeremo got instructions from Milaine.

“You can’t slack off just because I’m not there.”

“I know, I know!”

Cliff got his last few thank yous out, and I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

“Hey, wait,” said Cliff, clearing his throat. “Are we riding from here?”

“Yeah, we are, why?”

“Shouldn’t we, ah. Get on them outside of the seaport?”

“Why?”

I didn’t understand what he said.

Cliff glanced around. “It’s a little embarrassing, isn’t it?”

Huh? Riding on Kumayuru and Kumakyu...embarrassing?

“Anyway, erm, we’re getting on the bears after we get out of the seaport,” he said, and started walking stiffly away. Milaine and I started cracking up as we followed, and before long, we were outright laughing.

Chapter 107:

The Bear Makes Anz's Shop

ONCE WE LEFT THE SEAPORT, Cliff got on Kumayuru in a spot where the townspeople couldn't see. It was pretty surreal watching Cliff ride on Kumayuru, an embarrassed lord on a cute bear. Milaine couldn't stop smiling—she definitely thought the same thing.

"We're heading home right away," said Cliff in an incredibly serious voice, sitting proudly atop a fuzzy-wuzzy bear.

On our way to the tunnel, we caught sight of a stone wall, and behind it two massive bears—my new bear house.

"When I headed over to see the tunnel," said Cliff, "I was shocked to see this giant...*thing* had been constructed."

"I told you I made one."

"But it's so *large*."

"I wanted to bring the orphans along, started planning for that, and things got a little bit..." I gestured vaguely at the whole thing.

"Yuna," said Milaine from behind me—we were both atop Kumakyu, "you've simply got to let me stay there next time I'm here."

Of course, I said she could. We reached the tunnel on bearback and its entrance, with the bear statue beside it. People who didn't know me would think it was just a regular old bear, right? No one would equate this bear statue to me, right? Yeah. Yeah, no way...or that's what I told myself as I used bear light magic and headed into the tunnel.

With the tunnel brightly illuminated, my bears broke out into a run toward the exit of the tunnel. Partway there, we ran into a stray goblin, but I took care of it lickety-split and burned the goblin extra-crispy so the body wouldn't attract other monsters.

“Looks like we’ve got to finish the tunnel quick or monsters will settle into it,” I muttered.

“Not surprising,” said Milaine. “A hole like this is exactly the right conditions for a monster nest.”

“Yes. First, we’ll send adventurers here and have them slay the monsters around the area. We can’t bring workers over until we’ve ensured it’s safe.”

“But before we can dispatch adventurers, we’ll need to conduct a survey of what kinds of monsters there are.”

“We can just ask the adventurers’ guild for that.” Not a bad idea. They were pretty likely to have already collected information about the local monsters.

The moment we got out of the tunnel and I tried heading out to Crimonia, Cliff stopped us.

“Yuna, wait. You haven’t forgotten, have you?”

When I turned around, Cliff had a mortifying grin on his face. Of *course* I remembered. That’s why I tried to give these dorks the slip!

“Make the bear statue before we get back to Crimonia.”

“Can’t I do it next time?”

“Mm. Can you give a specific time? No, I don’t think so. You’re just trying to get out of it.”

“Hrm.” He’d figured me out. Just when I thought I’d gotten away with it...!

“I can see your squirrely eyes. It’s going to formally be called the Bear Tunnel, so we need a bear statue, don’t we? If you don’t put up a bear statue, I’ll make a statue of *you* instead.”

Fine adult he made, smiling while threatening me like that. A textbook example of the kind of adult you told kids to never grow into.

Milaine sighed. “Yuna, give this one up. Cliff is insufferable when he gets like this. Though I’ll admit, a statue of you would be quite the sight.”

“You too, Milaine?” Was there no escape?

I reluctantly hopped off Kumakyu and created a cartoonified bear statue in

front of the tunnel entrance. The one good thing was that it wasn't a statue of me. If Cliff *did* make a statue of me, I'd never be able to use the tunnel again and I'd never be able to go to Mileela seaport for the shame.

When I made the statue, my bears perked up. Maybe they were happy to have another one of their own with them? Very cute, very weird, and perfectly on brand for my fuzzy little guys.

With my statue done (ugh), I started off to Crimonia again. The two of them headed off to their workplaces, Cliff to his lord's estate and Milaine to the trade guild. As for me, I just went home. I was the only one without a job to do, so I could laze around. Sure, I had errands to run, but I wasn't in a hurry, so...I'd do those tomorrow.

I'll do it tomorrow. I'll put in actual effort tomorrow. Ah, the mantra of a slacker. Why do something today if it could wait? No reason to force it when the bed was cozy and (best yet) *right there*.

The next day, I went to the trade guild to see Milaine and figure out Anz's shop. I could've done it tomorrow or the day after, but I think even I have a limit to my slacking. Plus, Anz was finally really coming to Crimonia. I needed to have the shop prepped and ready to go for when she got there.

I got to the guild, but...no Milaine. Maybe she was working in the back?

"Um, Miss Bear?" someone asked.

"Who, me?" At the sound of that very peculiar title, I turned to see a young girl who seemed to be part of the guild staff behind me.

"I mean Miss Yuna, are you looking for Ms. Milaine?"

Uh-huh. Pretending she hadn't just called me Miss Bear just now, was she? Not that I could complain, especially considering I just answered to it... "Yeah, I am. Is she around?"

"Yes, she is. However, she has been in her office since yesterday. I'm not sure she's even slept."

Wow, working nonstop since we'd gotten back? Being a guild master sounded

rough. I'd gotten a good night's sleep and felt in tiptop shape—the way of the slacker triumphed once again.

“Would you like me to call her?” asked the girl.

“But she's working, isn't she?” Maybe it'd be better to talk to one of the other staff? Milaine already knew about the shop, but I felt bad asking her for even more help after putting her through an all-nighter with the Mileela situation.

“Yuna, what's the matter?” And out came Milaine from the backroom while I fretted over what to do. Well, that's one way of solving things.

“I had something I wanted to ask you, Milaine.”

“Is it about Anz's shop, by any chance?” There we go, cutting right to the chase.

“I was hoping you'd help me out like you had with my other shop.” (She sure looked exhausted, though.) “I'd really like to set it up near the Bear's Lounge, if possible.”

“Yuna. Yuna, Yuna, Yuna. You know I'd like to help you, but this Mileela situation is...” she yawned. “Things are busy.” That ‘situation’ really *had* just happened, so it made sense. “Don't worry. Lianna?”

“Yes, ma'am?” That guild employee girl responded.

“Please sell Yuna some land near the Bear's Lounge. Give her a half-off discount.”

Whoa, really? From *Milaine*? “Guild master! Are you certain about that?”

“Yes, Ms. Milaine, are you sure?” said the staff member.

“Yes. Considering the profits that Yuna will bring to Crimonia in the future, the amount is insignificant. Yuna only has eyes for the seafood, but Cliff and I think that salt will be our biggest commodity.”

“Salt?”

“Naturally. Until now, we've been buying salt, but the ocean will get us large quantities at less cost. Furthermore, we'll be able to sell it to other towns and

villages. The profit will be far larger than you're thinking, Yuna, so don't worry about the land. Of course," she said, flashing me a tired smile, "we *do* need to keep up appearances though, so I can't just give it to you for free."

I suppose salt was important in any world. Even more valuable than sugar, if you thought about it. I normally bought salt without a thought, so I hadn't really realized, but these were the lord and trade guild's master I was talking about here. They looked at things from a completely different point of view.

Me, I just had a whim and did the thing. They, on the other hand, deliberated over their actions based on the interest of the town. That's a leader, and that's how I knew I wasn't one.

"Lianna, I'm leaving the rest up to you."

"What about you, guild master?"

"Me? I'm famished, so I'm going to have a meal." She weakly waved at us and left the guild.

"Well then, Ms. Yuna," Lianna said, "please come this way." I followed. "Would you like it near your current shop?"

"You know about my shop?"

"But of course! I have visited many times. That bread you call peat-sah is delicious."

"Thank you."

"Now, as far as the area around the shop is concerned, there are several buildings available. Do you have any requirements for the place?"

"I want to make a restaurant, so I need a building big enough for that."

"In that case, there are three options." Lianna led me along to the buildings and I bought one of the ones near the Bear's Lounge. It was slightly smaller than the the Bear's Lounge, but I lucked out with that one and found a former noble's estate. If I did some remodeling, this would do just fine.

"Tiermina. We've known each other a while, so—"

“Please say what you need to say, Yuna.”

“I need your help.”

“I was *wondering* where you were leading me...” The building came into view, and Tiermina let out a long sigh.

C’mon—Milaine was way too busy with work, so the only person I could count on was Tiermina.

“You just want it to be a restaurant then?” Exasperated as she was, Tiermina did still help me in the end. She always came through.

“Yeah, I want to make it kind of like Morin’s shop.”

“All right. I’ll make whatever arrangements I can.”

“Thank you.”

“But you’re in charge of making the bear ornaments, of course.”

“I’m not making any.”

“Really?”

Really. I’d only done that because they made the name of the shop Bear’s Lounge and wanted me to make the shop more bear-like. This time we hadn’t chosen a name for the shop, so we didn’t need any such thing.

“If we need them later,” said Tiermina, “you can make them then.”

“We super absolutely will not need decorative bears ever for this one, thanks.”

“You really think so? I suppose you wouldn’t do it if it didn’t need it.” Tiermina smiled as though she were insinuating something.

Eh, whatever.

I started remodeling the shop with Tiermina. We removed a wall on the first floor and made it one huge room. Since the kitchen was small, I expanded it a little. There was a pantry next to the kitchen, and I suppose it was big enough? If not, I could expand it later.

I’d figure out the tables and interior decoration after Anz came. By then things

would probably settle down for Milaine, so I could get her feedback too.

I left the second floor as is—Anz could live there or she could use it as a break room. I planned to figure out the details when Anz got here. For now, I figured out the basics and finished the areas that would take a lot of time. Since it was going to be Anz's shop, I needed to ask her opinion too.

But even this felt good. Felt like progress.

I headed outside and checked out the exterior of the building. The workers that Tiermina had arranged for cleaned it up nicely, so the building looked good, but it also looked a little barren. Maybe that was my imagination?

I looked at the Bear's Lounge, which was a slight distance away. I could see the bear ornaments even from here.

I looked at the building in front of me. Totally barren of bears.

But, you know, maybe Anz hated bears? That's the kind of thing you've gotta respect, so nope! No bears, no way.

Chapter 108:

The Bear Eats Pancakes

SEVERAL DAYS PASSED since I returned to Crimonia.

Milaine and Cliff were busily scrambling to organize...well, everything. They got the cooperation of the adventurers' guild to slay the monsters near the tunnel and had workers prepping the ground for a path leading to it. They ordered mana gems and hired workers to get them installed. Just the other day, Cliff had even gone to the capital, and he came back looking exhausted. Not *my* fault, by the way. Anyway, I think it's karma getting him for naming it the Bear Tunnel. (Really? *The Bear Tunnel*?)

Whatever, it'd be all right. I was famished, so I headed over to the Bear's Lounge.

The cartoonified bears were right there to greet me. They'd been the talk of the town recently, and the kids especially loved 'em. Part of that was promotion by Helen from the adventurers' guild, and Milaine spread word about it too, but the bread itself drew people in with sheer deliciousness.

A flock of customers passed as I inspected the shop, heading in for another taste of Morin's warm, fresh bread.

Our most recent top seller were pancakes positively *swimming* in honey, something that Morin and I had cooked up together. In terms of raw ingredients, our pancakes would never beat the ones back in my world, but they were tasty enough.

My goal today...was to eat those pancakes myself.

When I got in, I found tons of tiny bears bustling around the bakery. Those kids in bear uniforms came over the second they noticed me. I gave them head pats and told them to go back to their jobs—if one kid came up, the rest were prone to gathering and slowing everything down to a halt, which got them in trouble with Karin once. Head pats seemed like enough to stave that off—they went back to work, satisfied.

Agh, the kids' bear tails wagging back and forth as they walked off was so adorable. I mean, I'm a grown-up here, so that kinda cuteness simply didn't fit me. They looked much better on the kids, and the girls seemed especially good at pulling off that look.

But the clothes were becoming just a little concerning. A little while ago, I'd seen the kids from the shop walking around town in their uniforms. I asked Tiermina about it, and she told me the clothes were so comfortable the kids were just starting to wear them all the time. I even issued directions to get the kids money to buy their own clothes. In the end, though, Tiermina told me it was "good publicity" for the store and that was that.

Of course, they weren't onesies, but I didn't want to accidentally make animal cosplays fashionable in this world. I begged Tiermina to make it stop, though I had no idea how things would turn out.

"Everyone loves you, so of *course* they want to emulate you, Yuna. Just let them," she told me, but my instincts told me that this was a line I couldn't let them cross. If I just let it be, I could be patient zero of a bear onesie apocalypse.

As I walked around the restaurant looking for a good seat, I saw a familiar face having a meal:

The adventurer Rulina, eating pancakes all on her own. "Yuna, it's been so long!"

We hadn't run into each other in a while, partially because I hadn't gone to the adventurers' guild lately. "Rulina, don't you need to work?" I sat down across from her.

"Oh, I just finished a job yesterday, so I'm planning on resting for a while. Are you eating too?"

"I was getting hungry, yeah." We hailed a girl in a bear costume as she passed by and ordered some pancakes and fries. We were supposed to order at the counter, but there are advantages to owning the place.

"Oh, right, Yuna—can I ask you something?"

“What is it?”

“Does that Bear Tunnel have anything to do with you?”

Oh no. “Wh-Why are you asking *me*, of all people?”

“There’s the name, for one thing, and the bear statue in front of the tunnel looks a lot like the one in front of this shop.”

“You saw the statue?”

“Like I said, I just got back from a job. I was slaying the monsters near the tunnel.” Oh, this was that whole project Cliff mentioned to clear the monsters out. Guess Rulina was part of that. Of *course* she would’ve seen the statue. “So...does it have anything to do with you?”

Uhh. Uhh? Hmm. I didn’t want word to spread that I was related to the tunnel, but how could I get out of this?

“You don’t have to tell me,” she added, “but everyone thinks you’re involved.”

Ah man, of course they would—how had I fooled myself into thinking they wouldn’t? The tunnel’s name, the bear statue...the whole thing just screamed Yuna. This was all Cliff’s fault.

Well, there was no other option: I tried the play I talked over with Cliff and Milaine in advance. “Don’t go spreading this around, but I’m the discoverer of the tunnel.” It wasn’t like I could tell anyone I actually dug it.

“A secret tunnel?” Rulina narrowed her eyes at me skeptically. “Discovered this recently, right after you showed up, localized entirely within the town you just so happened to show up in?”

“Yes?” I said, slowly averting my eyes.

“Ha ha! All right, I didn’t mean to get you steamed there. We’ll say you found it.”

What was that supposed to mean? Well, whatever—at least she seemed to be done hounding me about it. We moved onto trivial things, and in the middle of that, the honey-laden pancakes, fries, and drinks came.

“Thank you,” I said to the girl with our food. She smiled happily and went back to work. The fresh pancakes and fries were lined up in front of my eyes, just waiting to be devoured...

“The food here sure is great.” Rulina reached out to grab my fries, and I decided (in my infinite wisdom) to allow this. She figured out that there was something up with the tunnel, so we could just consider this a little bribe: buying silence with fries. And hey, if I ran out of fries, I could just order more.

I got down to annihilating those sweet, sweet honey-topped pancakes, and was in the middle of sugary carb nirvana when Tiermina headed over to us.

“Oh, Yuna, you really *were* here!”

(Was I not supposed to be? I ate another mouthful of pancake.)

“Thank goodness,” said Tiermina. “There was something I wanted to ask you. Do you have a moment?”

“Did something happen?” I asked. Tiermina glanced around. “You can’t talk about it here?”

“It’s not that, not exactly.” She looked a little lost for words.

“Well then, I’ll go to the back. Rulina, you can have my fries in exchange for...” I made a little zip motion across my lips. With that, I left my fries on the table, taking my half-eaten pancakes and drink with me to the back room.

In the break room now, I set the pancakes on the table to get back to eating and waited for Tiermina to start. (So great with a generous helping of honey...)

“So, is something wrong?”

“Those pancakes you’re eating may be some of the last we’ll sell.”

I paused in the middle of my second bite. Excuse me?

“The price of honey,” she continued, “has gone up by a lot.”

“But...but *why*?” I couldn’t even imagine pancakes without honey.

“The reason is simple, Yuna: we can’t *get* more honey.”

“And why is that?”

“The place local honey is harvested from is...unavailable.”

“Unavailable?”

“Full of monsters,” said Tiermina. I tried to imagine what kind of monster would lurk around beehives, and all I could think of was another bear, a yellow little guy with a hundred-acre hunger for honey. “If the price keeps increasing at this rate, we won’t be able to afford it. That or we’ll have to increase the price of the pancakes and any bread that uses honey.”

“So...you want me to go slay the monsters?”

“Huh? No, I’m talking about the shop. As far as the monster slaying goes, there should be a quest at the adventurers’ guild for that. You own the shop, so you really should think all these things over.”

Right, which is why I thought she told me to slay the monsters so we could get that golden good stuff. I guess she wasn’t, though? Maybe I was getting more impulsive...yeah, if I didn’t pause and deliberate now and then, I’d end up in trouble.

“We have to either temporarily discontinue the products that use honey or raise the prices,” she said.

“Can we really sell our stock if we jack up the price?”

“Maybe not as much as usual, but I think we’d still make sales. Then again, the things that use honey are popular with the kids, so I’d rather not raise the prices.”

“So that’s the situation?”

“Yes. What should we do?”

Basically, we had three options: stop sales, prepare to sell things at a loss, or peg our prices to the cost of honey. “What did Morin have to say about this?”

“She doesn’t like dealing with money; she said she’d leave it up to me.”

I nodded. Yep, very Morin-ish.

“She *did* say that if we’re not getting any more honey, she’ll have to change the menu, so she’d rather know sooner than later.”

“How’s our current stock?”

“We’ve been making a lot of sales...” said Tiermina thoughtfully. “So...I’d say we have two or three days. It isn’t much time, and I just wish I knew what to do.”

Hmm, not great, but...if it really was just a small loss, I could deal with it. “The pancakes really are that popular?”

“*Everything* is popular. That’s why I don’t think that our overall sales will decrease if we lose all our products that use honey, even if we’ll have some disappointed customers...and we will, especially the kids.”

Ugh, I really needed to figure out what was up with the honey then. “You think the trade guild knows what’s going on?”

“I doubt it. I asked them the other day, but I haven’t heard a peep yet.”

“Gotcha. Once I finish this,” I said, raising the pancake piece on my fork, “I’ll head over to the trade guild.” Ahh. Good stuff.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’ve been leaving everything about the shop to you. I’ve got to act like the shop’s owner every once in a while.” Plus, I’d spent more than enough time living that slacker life after coming back from Mileela. If I didn’t work sometimes, what kind of example would that be for the little kids?

Chapter 109:

The Bear Rises to Adventurer Rank C

I HEADED TO THE TRADE GUILD to ask about the honey, but I couldn't find Milaine there—she normally would have been skipping out on her guild master duties and hanging around the reception desk. She really *was* busy with all the Mileela stuff, I guess? Huh. Maybe I wouldn't see Milaine sitting at the reception desk for a while. Bummed me out a little.

Okay, so...no Milaine. Then which reception desk would I go to? I thought that over when I caught sight of Lianna, who helped me out with buying land a few days ago. Yeah, she could probably help.

"Ms. Yuna, welcome. What brings you here today? Your new building isn't having issues, is it?"

"Nah, that's all fine. In fact, I'm still amazed I got it so cheap—it feels like I ripped you off."

"Oh, not at all. A few days ago, I asked the guild master about what you did for Mileela. You deserve far more than a discount—come to think of it, you should actually be raised to Merchant Rank A status."

Whoa, hold on, that seemed a little dramatic. I heard that A-Rank merchants were on the level of the high rollers trading in the capital. No way would I end up as big as them...in fact, no way did I *want* to. "Rank A seems like a long shot."

At that, Lianna glanced around, came closer, and started to speak to me in a lowered voice: "No, it's no long shot. I heard that a portion of the tunnel toll will be deposited into your card during the guild meeting a few days ago. You'll earn a *great* deal of money from that. There is no doubt in my mind that you'll be at Rank A in a few years."

Whoa, wait— "Milaine's not supposed to talk about that!"

According to Cliff and Milaine, getting a portion of the profit was the right of the person who made the tunnel. They considered buying the tunnel from me

outright, but apparently that hadn't been practical. I was no Cliff: extra cash was always nice, so I decided to accept it.

Seeing the shock on my face, Lianna put her finger to her mouth. "Shh. Rest assured that only a few of us know about you, Ms. Yuna. The only staff who know are the ones managing the books and the people working directly for the guild master."

"Isn't Milaine the guild master? Aren't you *all* working for her?"

"I should have phrased it differently. By 'for' I meant the people who can act in *place* of the guild master when she's not here.."

"In other words, you sub for Milaine?"

"I'm not anything that special. I'm just in charge of reception duties for you when the guild master isn't here." What the heck did that mean? She was in charge of receiving me? Like what, it took someone special to put up with me?

"I think it's because I helped you the other day with the building. When the guild master is gone, please come to me any time. And if there's anything I can't do, I'll let the guild master know."

Well, it was better than some stranger being in charge of me. "Why would my guild rank go up if I get some of the tunnel tolls?"

"You're a merchant, so a portion of your profits from the tolls will be taxed. Simply put, that will bring up your rank."

Weird. I hadn't thought of the tunnel as some kind of business venture, and I wasn't sure how useful a "merchant rank" could even be.

"Now, Ms. Yuna," she continued, "what have you come here for today?"

Oh yeah, I *had* come here for a reason. I got down to business before I could get sidetracked again. "I heard that it's harder to get honey now because of some monster, right? What's up with that?"

"Ah, that business."

"Yeah. I need honey for my shop, and the price hike is messing that up."

"There's a quest to slay the monsters that have appeared at the bee tree. Once those are slayed, the price should go back to normal."

A bee...tree? No, I must've heard that wrong, she must've meant a *beehive*.
"A quest to slay the monsters at the beehive. Got it."

"No, Ms. Yuna, it's not a beehive. It's the bee *tree*."

O...kay then. "Uh, so what's a bee tree?"

"Ms. Yuna, do you really not know?"

"It's my first time hearing about it."

"When nectar-collecting bees gather, they create a bee tree: a gigantic tree where several tens or even hundreds of thousands of bees gather to transform the entire tree into a nest."

A...hundred thousand bees? Just the concept wiggled me out a little.
"Wouldn't it be dangerous to gather honey with that many bees?"

"Oh no, Ms. Yuna, nectar-collecting bees are docile. You should be fine as long as you don't attack them. As for the honey collection itself, we have specialists for that. There's no danger involved."

Specialist honey collectors, huh? Well, I guess Japan had some of those too.
"Do you know what the monsters are?" Hopefully weak ones. I wanted to get this done pronto.

"The honey collectors say it was a horde of goblins. They saw the monsters gathered at the bee tree and submitted a quest to the adventurers' guild a few days ago. Someone should slay them soon."

Oh, just goblins? Adventurers could handle that just fine, no need for me to butt in.

"If you'd like the status of the situation," she continued, "you could ask at the adventurers' guild."

"Sounds good. I'll pop over and ask them what's up—thanks."

With that, I was off to the adventurers' guild. When I went inside, I saw that there were fewer adventurers than usual...and the ones who were there took a step back at the sight of me. C'mon, I wasn't going to do anything to 'em, it's not like I was menacing at all!

Wondering about that, I headed over to the reception desk where Helen worked.

“Ms. Yuna, what’s wrong?”

Wrong? Nothing at all—I was just another adventurer coming into the adventurers’ guild. Maybe she asked because it had been a while since I stopped by. “I had something I wanted to ask real quick.”

“A question? Before we do that, could I see your guild card, Ms. Yuna?”

“Why?”

“The guild master asked me to increase your rank when you come by.”

“My rank?”

“Yes. The other day, our guild master and Lord Cliff met together. It seems like they were talking about you. I don’t know the details, but the guild master clutched his head afterward when he ordered me to increase your rank.”

Cliff hadn’t told the guild master about the kraken...right?

“We also have a message from the guild master. It seems that ordinarily we would increase you to Rank C after that discussion, but the guild master is willing to increase you to Rank B if you so wish.” She gave me a look. “Ms. Yuna, just what did you do?”

Boiled a big squid, that’s all...not that I could tell her that.

I didn’t answer, so she continued: “Would you like to be raised to Rank B?”

“Ehh. I’m fine staying at my same rank.” I didn’t like the idea of hitting Rank B without doing any of the general quests. Ranks and stuff were fun because you got to climb that ladder. Skipping the steps missed the point.

Helen cleared her throat. “The guild master further said, and I quote: ‘If we don’t increase her rank, it’ll make me look bad, so bump her up by any means necessary.’”

Fine, fine. “I guess I’ll take Rank C.” Just one step up didn’t seem so bad.

“Are you sure? You could go up to Rank B. That’s not something just anyone can ask for.”

“If I told anyone I was in Rank B, they’d never believe me anyway. I’m happy with the rank I’ve got.” Then again, not like anyone was going to believe I was at Rank C either.

“Are you really sure about this?” she asked, and I nodded. “Very well. In that case, I will increase your rank by a level to Rank C.” Helen operated the crystal panel and changed the guild rank on my card. “It’s amazing you’ve even reached Rank C in these few months. Really, what *did* you do that warranted skipping all the way to Rank B?”

I gave a big, dramatic shrug. “Who knows? I sure don’t.”

“You’re serious?” Helen looked dubious. They really had hidden the whole kraken thing. If that was on my slaying record, no way would Helen be hounding me like this. Maybe it was invisible to everyone except the guild masters, like the seal of Elfanica.

After I got my guild card back, I had to change the subject—couldn’t have her keep questioning me about this forever, after all. “I came here to ask you about something.”

“Hmm. All right, but you can’t hide this forever. I’ll get it out of you next time. What was it that you wanted to ask about?”



“We got a monster infestation at the bee tree, right? I wondered how that quest is going.”

“Ah, the bee tree? Umm. Please wait just one moment.”

Helen operated the crystal panel. “There was an adventurer party that accepted the quest a few days ago, but it seems they haven’t completed the quest yet.”

“Are they all right?”

“Yes, I believe so. It’s a quest to clear out thirty goblins, so it shouldn’t be trouble.” Well, that was a relief. I guess the honey would get back to flowing in a couple of days. “Oh! Look at that—those adventurers are back.”

Helen looked at the entrance. A party of five adventurers came in, all guys, but...there was something up about them. Most adventurers would be on cloud nine after finishing a quest, talking about gettings drinks or food or something. These returning adventurers looked kinda mad.

They started shouting as they headed to the reception desk. “Hey, that quest was totally different from how it was described!” one of them roared. Helen jumped.

“Wh-what kind of quest was that?” she asked, shrinking back a little.

The rowdy guys went on to ask why there were orcs on a goblin-horde slaying quest. They hadn’t even bothered to take on the orcs, coming right back instead. I couldn’t blame them, I guess. There was a pretty big difference between orcs and goblins, strength-wise, though they were both nothing special in my book.

The adventurers were applying now to get the quest scrubbed from their record, and I was curious about that. “Does this quest end up getting treated as a failure, then?”

Helen shook her head. “It gets put on hold. If the next adventurers who take the quest see orcs, then this party here won’t get a failure on their record, as the quest information was incorrect. If there were actually only goblins, though, then they would get a failure.”

Interesting. “What if there are both?”

“Well, it depends on the situation. Are the goblins and orcs operating together or separately? If they’re together, then the quest information would have been incorrect. If they operate separately, then not defeating them would be considered a failure.”

Wow, there were a lot more ways this sort of stuff could turn out than I thought. Seemed like a lot of hassle for the people submitting and accepting the quest; the adventurers grumbled as they left the guild.

And now no one was taking care of the orcs at the bee tree. This was bad. “Helen, can I accept that quest?”

“I don’t see why not, but...are you planning to go alone?”

“Yeah, I am. Why?”

“I know you defeated a black viper, and I’m sure you’ll be fine, but you *are* a young girl. Please don’t push yourself too hard.”

“Thanks. I’ll be careful,” I said, and it sounded a little meek out loud.

“Good. One moment, please: let’s go through the proper procedures.” I presented my guild card again and she registered the quest on it.

Helen told me where the bee tree was, and I still remembered the location of the orcs from those adventurers earlier, so I was set: somebody had to do something, because there was no way these orcs were gonna beehive.

Chapter 110:

The Bear Heads Out to the Bee Tree

I RODE KUMAYURU to the forest that held the bee tree. According to Helen, the tree was supposed to be smack-dab in the middle of it, and I'd spot it right away by its...*unique* appearance. Needless to say, I wasn't expecting something warm or fuzzy.

Before I headed into the forest, I used my detection skill to check for monsters. Ten or so orcs, looked like. On top of that, I spotted some out-of-the-way goblin signals. That was sure gonna make the lives of some adventurers interesting.

For the time being, I rode Kumayuru to the location of the orcs, figuring I'd find the bee tree there too. After a while, petals started fluttering in the air ahead, and before long the forest broke and I was greeted with a swirl of colorful flowers.

I took a deep breath, and almost forgot to breathe out. Red, blue, yellow, orange—so many colors, all in bloom. It spread far, far out of sight...I could hardly believe that a place like this existed in a forest that looked like any other. And in the center of it all, high above the meadow, stood a tree.

The bee tree, maybe? "It's huge..." And at the foot of that gargantuan tree, really throwing a wrench in the storybook picture, stood a pack of drooling orcs with the ugliest mugs you've ever seen, guzzling honey.

Guzzling *my* honey.

The instant I stepped out into the clearing to get this battle on, goblins leapt out of the forest from my right...but not at me, fortunately. No, they were racing right at the orcs, brandishing wooden sticks and knives they'd gotten from who knew where.

What, was this a turf war?

Well, I planned on beating both sides as soon as I'd seen 'em with detection

skill, so it was all fine by me. The goblins had the numbers advantage, but they were still scrawnier—when the goblins got whomped by an orc’s heavy blows, they’d be down for the count. But still, the goblins knew how to use their numbers, so each orc fought against multiple goblins. Tactics really balanced ‘em out.

Yeah, I thought I might just park my butt in the pretty meadow and watch the show till I had to do cleanup, but...then I remembered the flowers. As the orcs and goblins stabbed and whacked and snarled, they trampled those beautiful flowers. You know, the stuff we need for all the honey? At this rate, the idiots would crush all the flowers in the path of the battle...

The moment I tried to make another move, Kumayuru stopped me. This time, two huge black things jumped out from the left side of the woods. They leapt into the fray and rushed at the horde of goblins and orcs.

I could barely believe it. “Bears?!”

Yep—two of them, running in to intervene in the fight. One of them was large, while the other was on the smaller side—and both were barging into the scuffle between the goblins and the orcs. Their surprise attack sent the two hordes into total confusion. The bears took on both parties, beating on the goblins, slashing at the orcs...

The goblins fled almost at once, and that just left the orcs.

Ten orcs, that is, and only two bears. Not good for the bears...as they fought one orc, another orc would attack them from the side. The orc pummeled one bear with a club, and it couldn’t get away. The other bear tried helping, but it was completely surrounded by orcs.

“Uhh, so what should I do here?” Three groups fought over the honey. If I joined in, that’d make four. Taking a common sense approach, I *could* just fight off everyone—the goblins, orcs, and bears, but...really? The bears? That’d be like killing Kumayuru and Kumakyu’s own kind.

As I deliberated, the bears were losing ground, even if the battle wasn’t over yet. They knocked down a few orcs in front of them and took big ol’ chomps into the monsters’ necks. These fuzzy guys were *strong*. One-on-one, bear-against-orc, they would’ve been fine, but...there were just too many monsters

for them to handle right now. When the bears turned to their next target, they slowed. A red orc appeared from behind the giant tree—an orcish subspecies. In the game, it was a type of special-colored orc monster that was several levels higher and a *lot* nastier than regular orcs.

The bears went for the red orc, but it hit right back with its club. At least it wasn't a sword, or they'd be done for, but...argh, this was still such a messed-up situation. One bear body-slammed into Red, but it didn't even flinch. Red brought its club down, and that was it, I couldn't wait anymore, I had to spring into action.

I fired off shots of water magic from afar, sniper-style. Each shot hit Red, got it staggering a bit. The bear it hit with the club ran off into the woods, shaky but alive, and the other one followed.

The abandoned red orc hadn't realized I was the one attacking it, so it brought its club down on its fellow orcs, mad and stupid as it was. It wasn't a pleasant sight, so I hopped on Kumayuru and silently left. I hoped that bear was all right after getting bludgeoned. That orc was strong enough to prep its buddies for a late-night hamburger grill-out, so I was naturally pretty worried about that bear.

Although I hadn't given Kumayuru a destination, we eventually found the two bears. Actually, we found *four* bears—the two from earlier and two cubs. Two kids and two parents, huh? Maybe the dad was the bigger one and the mama bear was the smaller one? Sure, let's go with that.

One of the parents was collapsed. The other one gave me a low, threatening growl when it saw me.

Kumayuru let me off, started walking to the bears, and...talked? I mean, they didn't *talk*. There weren't words, but it looked like a conversation. I watched them, half-wondering if it was even *real*, and suddenly the bears nodded at each other like they'd come to a mutual understanding.

What? No, I mean seriously, *what*? Kumayuru came back and prodded me along with its nose, taking me to the collapsed bear. "Do you want me, um," I gave Kumayuru an uncertain look. Swallowed. "Do you want me to heal the bear's wounds or something?"

“Cwoooooom.”

“All right, if you say so. Or...coo...so?”

This was Kumayuru asking me for this, after all. I couldn’t turn my bear down. Plus, no way could I abandon some poor injured bear. I approached the collapsed bear, half-expecting to hear a threatening growl from the others. Nothing happened. Had Kumayuru really said something, somehow? Had they really talked?

I used healing magic on the wounded bear and—slowly, carefully—the bear stood. Its watching cubs nuzzled their parent happily.

Huh! Neat.

Kumayuru stepped in among the bear family and started to talk?—yeah, let’s go with “talk”—about something. I had no idea what they were saying, but the conversation seemed pretty amicable. Probably. Since I didn’t want Kumakyu to get grumpy over being left out, I summoned my second bear.

At which point Kumakyu joined the ring and started to talk (okay but really? *talking?*). Argh, what were they saying, though? Cwoom. Cwooooooom. I leaned in a little bit. It was the same bear sound, but louder.

After a while, as though their conversation came to an end, my bears came back to me. They were crooning at me as they inched closer, like they wanted something. I didn’t need to speak bearese to get the gist. “You’re asking me to slay the red orc, aren’t you?”

Yep. “Cwoom.”

Fighting the red orc was fine by me, really. The issue was what came after: even if I defeated the monsters, what if the bears got in the way of honey harvesting? As I thought about it, the mama and papa bearents left the cubs behind and went on the move. Wait, they weren’t going to go back to battle the red orc, were they? There I was, hesitating and wondering and worrying, and my bears approached me...

...making their point. “All right, I’ll go.”

My bears cooed happily. This was a request coming from *my* bears. What

came later could just come later. For the time being, I'd defeat the red orc. The red orc was my enemy, and no request—not from the guild, not from my restaurant, not from anyone—was going to change that.

I started walking to the bee tree where the red orc waited. The orcs stood around it in formation, but the red orc was among them now and the whole place had a different atmosphere. Their very presence clashed with the sprawling expanse of flowers.

The bearents slowly walked toward the orcs. I wished they wouldn't act on their own, but I couldn't tell them that. All I could do was follow.

The bears ran at the orcs, who drew their weapons. Red raised a cry loud enough to set my head ringing, and that was all the orcs needed to hear before rushing us all at once. The bearents took their assault head-on. I wished they wouldn't get in front and would just leave things to me, but they were protecting their home. Their cubs, too, probably.

I joined the fray and launched a volley of wind magic at the orcs. A few clean slices and a few orc heads were lying in the flowers now. The bears did their part too, taking orcs down one by one.

The red orc saw it all and its growl rose to a raging roar. It broke into a run, headed straight for the papa bear. It gripped its monstrous club, aimed at the bear and swung—and from his side, the mama bear hurled herself at the red orc. A few other orcs joined the melee as the papa bear tried to swipe the red orc, and it was practically a free-for-all. I couldn't use magic in a situation like this.

Red swung, and papa bear dodged. The club smacked into the ground, tearing into the blooming flowers, scattering a rainbow of petals into the air. The mama bear saw the opening and *whoosh*—went in at red from the side. She tried to hurl herself at him again, but...no. The red orc once again brought up his club... the papa bear attacked...and the club was aimed straight at the mama bear.

The red orc swung. The papa bear couldn't hit in time. The club landed square in the middle of mama bear's back.

No.

The mama bear groaned and collapsed. The papa bear rushed in at the red orc, the orc brought up its lowered club and went straight into another attack.

The club hit papa bear's side.

Oh, no. You. Didn't.

The bearents groaned, both collapsed at the red orc's feet. The red orc drooled over the pair. Heaved its club up. Got ready to bring it down, and I went on the move.

Bam. Bear punch, right side of the red orc. It crushed the flowers as it tumbled onto the ground.

Hm. Been a while since I'd snapped, hadn't it? Something about seeing two bear parents get whaled on by a heartless red orc does something to you, I guess.

So things were too close-quarters for magic. So what? All I needed was my fist.

Yeah, bears are ferocious and brutal creatures if you get on their bad side. Hungry bears even attack humans, but things were different now. I'd met Kumayuru and Kumakyu. I couldn't bear to let their buddies suffer.

Sure, there was a chance these bears would someday attack humans, no matter how small, but right now? I would be their protector. Right now, I was seeing red, and the red was on an orc, and I really, really wanted to punch that red out of it.

The red orc stood. Looked at me.

I'd fight this brawl in the bears' place. I'd give the orcs a taste of the bears' pain.

I raced toward the red orc. It swung at me, but I caught its club with my white bear hand. Now *this*—this was for the mama bear. *Crack*. I snuck a bear punch in the orc's unprotected side with my black bear hand. The red orc dropped its club from the recoil and the pain. I snatched it up in my white bear glove, switched it to the black glove, and held it firm.

When the red orc finally righted itself, it was glaring at me for the first time. It could see me now as I was: not as a meal, but as an enemy.

Too late, big guy. I brought the club down on the red orc, and it blocked the blow just like I had, like it thought it could fight half as well as me. I pulverized its arm for its trouble. Now *this*—this was for the papa bear.

The red orc raised a strangled cry. How many times had it done this to others? Must've felt pretty different on the receiving end.

The red orc turned tail and ran, I guess because it still thought that was an option.

Nope. I pulled up a wall from the earth with magic, closing off its escape route. Here we were at the very end, and the red orc looked at me with fear. It didn't even intend to fight back—much like the little cubs it wanted to leave alone and starving.

Too bad. Hurting those bears earned it a grizzly end: I used a bear cutter to send its head hurtling off into the field of flowers, and that was that.



When I turned around, my bears had just finished annihilating the orcs. I approached the collapsed bears, used healing magic on them, and...okay, thank goodness, they'd be okay. The bearents got up and nuzzled me like some kind of thanks.

"Hey," I said cautiously, "so...humans? If you just so happen to see them gathering honey, could you not...eat them?" I knew they wouldn't be able to understand me, but I ended up asking anyway. Couldn't the bear onesie come through with a Bear Speech ability or something?

As I was thinking that, Kumayuru and Kumakyu headed over to the bearents and started to have what seemed to be another long conversation (is that the right word?) with them. The bearents went around me, then, and started to push me along toward...toward the bee tree?

"Are you telling me to go gather honey?"

"*Cwoom*," said Kumayuru. Okay then...though there were bees buzzing around, none of them attacked me. I pulled a jar out of my bear storage and carefully began to collect the honey.

Chapter 111:

The Bear Broods Over What to Do About the Bears

THE BEE NEST WRAPPED around the trunk of the bee tree. When I took off my bear puppet and (eep, here we go) stuck my finger into a hole in the tree, honey came oozing out. I gave the honey a cautious lick—yep, sweet and delicious. The bees buzzing around me didn't do wonders for my nerves, but all they did was fly. No aggression, all chill.

While I collected the honey, the two cubs came plodding along from the woods on their little paws. I thought they were heading to their parents as they dodged the dead orcs, but they passed mama and papa bear, making a beeline for the bee tree, and started munching on honey.

Seriously, kids? Your poor bearents. They fought super hard, you know, so they—but aww, okay, the two cubs were pretty cute munching on the honey.

I filled my jar already, so I put it away in my bear storage and bid adieu to the bears. “Thanks for everything. Now, you two better stay responsible and keep out of trouble, hear me? You got kids to worry about.” I knew that my words wouldn't get through to them, but I hoped they could hear my tone. They crooned in reply.

Maybe they *did* understand, in some way. The cubs stopped eating honey as though they had their fill. When the bearents saw that, they quietly called to the kids and started moving on for the forest. The cubs tailed them, and...they were gone.

Down to business, I guess. I collected the orc corpses, making sure not to forget to take out the remaining goblins that ran off into the woods.

On my way back, I brooded over what I would report back on for this quest. Let's see, I hadn't killed the bears and cubs. The quest only mentioned the goblins and orcs needed slaying after all—no mention of bears at all. But from a public safety perspective, didn't I really need to report on the bears? Okay, but if I did *that*, they might issue a new quest to slay them. If a slaying quest did go

out, all I could do was move the bears to a location where people wouldn't bother them.

I brooded over that, leaving the woods and making my way back, but by the time I was at the town entrance, I still wasn't sure about an answer. The sun sank behind the horizon, leaving twilight behind like a shed skin.

As I made my way to the adventurers' guild, I saw Helen rushing over to me. "Ms. Yuna, welcome back. Did you already finish your quest?"

"I did. What about you?"

"Oh, I just finished work, so I'm heading home. You seem rather glum, though...did something happen? You've done so much for us, so I do hope you know I can always lend an ear. I don't know how much I'll be able to do beyond that, but I can try if you need me to."

"I slayed the goblins and orcs," I admitted, "but there was one issue that's been bugging me." Should I tell her the rest? She was a guild employee, after all, but...well, I couldn't come up with a better answer, so I told her the whole thing.

"There are bears?"

"Yeah, but I really don't want to kill them. They haven't done anything wrong."

"Yes, I suppose there isn't much to be done about that. If you killed the bears, it would be a little like killing yourself. Is that right, Ms. Yuna?"

Err. Maybe overstating it a *little*, but she got the gist.

"Bears, then?" she repeated to herself. "I remember Mr. Lem saying he saw bears on a honey collection quest a few months ago. They might be the very same ones."

"Lem?"

"The person who takes care of the bee tree. You saw the field of flowers, right?"

"Yeah, they were really pretty."

“Mr. Lem is the caretaker for those flowers. He gets the flowers around the bee tree nice and blooming for the bees, and then he collects the honey.”

So that’s how a whole field of flowers was blooming so beautifully—there was someone taking care of them. Good luck to the poor guy, though, considering all the orcs that had rampaged through it. Fixing it up sounded like an ordeal, but I guess that was how they collected honey in this world.

“But hold on, why doesn’t somebody just steal the honey? Isn’t it, like, a honey buffet as far as thieves are concerned?”

“The bee tree is under Lord Cliff’s purview. Just the act of selling honey would require Lord Cliff’s permission, so there’s little point in stealing it.”

“The bee tree belongs to Cliff?”

“Of course it does. Fundamentally, bee trees are valuable resources, so they fall under the management of the lord of that land. This town is no exception to the law, and we’ve left that upkeep to Mr. Lem.”

Huh. I guess that was just how it went here. “So this Lem guy, he knows about the bears?”

“I overheard him talking about the bears once, at least.”

“Do you remember what he said?”

“I’m sorry, no—I hadn’t been listening in directly. We could go see him, if it’s worrying you.”

“Isn’t your workday over?”

“I don’t mind,” said Helen. “In fact, I think it would be best to tell Mr. Lem about what happened with the honey as soon as possible.”

With that, the two of us went to see Lem, the keeper of the bee tree. Helen led me to a shop with a honey sign, though it looked like the place was closed.

“Mr. Lemmm!” She rapped on the door. “Are you in?”

As she knocked, the door opened and a man past his forties appeared.

“Who’re you lot?” he grumbled. “If you want honey, you’re not getting any discounts.”

“Good evening, Mr. Lem.”

“You...oh, I’ve seen you before. You’re from the adventurers’ guild?”

“I’m Helen. I’m here today about the honey.”

“Mmhm.” Mr. Lem nodded. “Heard it wasn’t goblins there, but orcs. But I know what I saw, and I dang well saw some goblins.”

“Ms. Yuna right here completed that quest today.”

Mr. Lem looked over at me. “You’re the girl from the Bear’s Lounge, eh? And you defeated them?”

“You know about me?”

“Course I do. I heard from Tiermina. You’re the owner of the Bear’s Lounge, aren’t you?” Tiermina bought honey from this shop, so I guess he *would* know who I am. “I reckon the whole town knows who ya are,” he said with a smile.

Err, what? Everybody in town? *Everyone*?

Helen nodded at the side. Why the heck was she nodding? “We had something to ask you, if you have a moment. Do you have a moment?”

“Yes, ’course. Come right in.” He opened the door and let us through. The shelves of the shop were bare, probably because there was no honey to collect. He led us further back into what seemed like a break room for employees, furnished with chairs and tables. “Have a seat. Tell me straight, now: did you really defeat those monsters?”

“I did, but there was a problem.”

“Bahh!” Mr. Lem’s smile disappeared instantly and his face went dark. “We got another monster on our hands?”

“No, no monsters,” said Helen. “Do you know about the bears that live near the bee tree?”

“Bears?” He blinked. “Ahh, *those* bears.”

“You know about them?” I asked.

“Know about them? Ha! We honey collectors owe our lives to those guys.”

“You know them and you *owe* them?”

“They been there for me a few times when goblins tried to get a piece of me—goblins’ll do that, and they’ve tried it a *lot* with me. They’ve even kept my employees safe.” A cautious smile crossed his face. “You don’t mean to say you saw the bears?!” He stood from his seat and leaned over.

I wasn’t expecting that kind of answer. “Yeah?”

He took a deep breath and beamed. “Ha! And they’re alive? There were just so many goblins, and now I hear orcs on top of that. I was worried sick about ’em, thinking they’d been killed. Alive,” he said slowly, as if tasting the words. “Thank goodness.”

“Yep,” I said. “As a matter of fact, the bears were fighting the goblins and orcs to protect the bee tree.”

“Were they?” Mr. Lem grimaced. “And you’re gonna tell me they’re okay, right? Right?”

“All four of them—the cubs included—were doing just fine.”

“Cubs! Ha! To think they finally had ’em, and in the middle of this mess!” He clapped his hands together. “Well, I’ve got to tell everybody about that.” Man, he was really jazzed just talking about these bears. The mood was contagious, heh. Looked like I’d been worried over nothing. “Now, girl...did you come here because you were worried about the bears or something?”

“Yeah. I mean, the quest only mentioned goblins and orcs, but I came back without slaying the bears, so...”

“Ah. Sorry you had to go out of your way comin’ over here just for that. The bears are all right. Harmless. Better’n harmless, matter of fact, they’re a lifesaver, and I do mean that.”

“There’s no issue with having those bears around in the woods then?”

“Nah, ’course not. Since those bears defeat the monsters for us, we can collect honey without worry. They protect us, we give ’em their share of the honey, and we all get on fine.” Huh. Mr. Lem prepped the flowers for the honeybees, shared the spoils, and got some big furry protection for it. Sounded

like a good deal to me.

“Mr. Lem,” Helen broke in, “is Lord Cliff aware of this?”

“No, we...haven’t told him,” Mr. Lem admitted. “I was worried he would have them slain if I did, you understand.”

“It would be better if you told him.”

“I suppose so,” he said reluctantly. I understood that—generally people thought of bears as ferocious, nasty beasts. But if Cliff told them to have adventurers take care of every monster near the bee tree, the bears would have no value to the village anymore. I’d rather they stayed put in the woods and kept taking care of monsters, but would Cliff allow that?

No matter what, abandoning those bears wasn’t an option for me.

“You can mention me by name,” I said. “Cliff owes me one, so I think he’ll hear what you have to say.”

Helen gave me a look. “Ms. Yuna, you’re saying that Lord Cliff...owes you one? And I can’t believe you wouldn’t address him without his title. Do you understand the significance of what you’re saying?” She looked appalled.

Oh, right—calling an aristocrat by name was in bad taste. Ever since the whole orphanage thing, I’ve just internally thought of him as plain old Cliff, and I just couldn’t break it. Besides, Cliff never seemed to care.

I shrugged. “Look, if Cliff seems reluctant to listen or does anything that’ll put the bears in danger, let me know. I’ll put him right, convince him and such.”

Helen didn’t seem so sure. “Really, Miss?”

“Yeah. And if, after all of that, he still says that he wants to slay the bears, just let me know. I’ll take the bears someplace else.” If Cliff said he was going to slay them, I could just make a bear transport gate and take the family someplace safe. I could figure out where as I went.

“In that case,” said Mr. Lem, “I will gratefully use your name.”

Helen sighed. “All right, but listen to me: if you care for those bears, make sure you report their existence in your quests. Don’t come crying to me if they accidentally end up slain.”

True. I mean, if I'd known about them beforehand, I wouldn't have been this worried. And if some other adventurer encountered the bears, that might've been the end of the whole fuzzy family.

"I'm sorry for not telling Lord Cliff any of this, truly am. Also, girl, thank you again. Deepest thanks for what you've done for the bee tree, for the bears. For me, too, I suppose."

"It's my job, so don't worry about it," I said. "As long as those bears live safe and sound, there's nothing else to say."

"Yes," said Mr. Lem, "I'll make sure to watch over them carefully."

"But if anything happens to them," I added, "let me know. I'll come running right away."

Mr. Lem bobbed his head gladly. "I'll rely on you when that time comes!"

Now that's a nice ending: once upon a time, there were four little bears living in a glade of flowers...and they lived happily ever after.

Chapter 112:

The Bear Becomes a Picture Book Author?

“**Y**OU WERE GOING TO ASK the trade guild about the honey,” said Tiermina, “and you ended up *slaying monsters*?”

I took a bite of a pancake that absolutely dripped with honey. Same batch I’d just gotten with Kumayuru and Kumakyu, actually. “I just went with the flow I guess?”

Tiermina let out a long, resigned sigh. C’mon, I *had* gone with the flow! But when I’d gotten to the trade guild, they told me I wouldn’t be able to find out about the status of the quest without asking the adventurers’ guild, and when I went to the adventurers’ guild, I ended up running into the adventurers who said they couldn’t fulfill the quest because the goblins ended up being orcs. All flowed pretty logically, you know? I went with the flow, slayed the orcs, and there we were.

“Well, thank you anyway,” she said. “This is a favorite with the kids. I really didn’t want to stop selling it.”

“I’m glad I got to act like the place’s owner for a change.” I’d been leaving the shop in Morin and Tiermina’s hands, but I’ve gotta get up and do something for the place every now and then, right?

“Ha ha! Come on, now, you *always* act like the place’s owner. We’re all grateful, too—me, Morin, and the orphans.” Tiermina kept flattering me, and I kept ordering delicious pancakes. Ooo, and the new bread selections too... “Are you really going to eat all of that?”

“I’m going on a little trip, so they’re presents.” Now that we had all that honey, I thought of bringing stuff to Lady Flora.

“Presents? Then I’ll ask them to pack them for transport. I’m on my way out too.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m heading to Mr. Lem to ask about stocking up on the honey. We also need to discuss prices.”

With a few parting orders to the kitchen, Tiermina left the shop. The kids brought me my pancakes and bread, I took it with me, and I headed back to my bear house to bear gate my way to the capital.

As I headed to the castle, there was such a different vibe from the one in Crimonia. People stared as I walked past. I guess Crimonia was easier to live in now that they knew me. I mean, people would stare in Crimonia, too, but it was different.

Before I could even show the castle gate guards my guild card, they opened up a path for me. “Come right in.” Seemed a little too easy, guild card or no, but at least I didn’t have to put up with any questioning or suspicious looks.

Just one weird thing, that was all: one of the many guards ran off as soon as he saw me. Hmm. I wondered if...

Heading to that familiar room, I sighed and resigned myself to what was coming. I passed through corridors I’d seen countless times. The castle workers and I traded greetings; there were a lot fewer surprised faces around when people saw me inside the castle. This place had truly accepted the way of the onesie.

I got to the room and knocked. A girl’s voice answered me.

“It’s Yuna, the adventurer,” I answered, which prompted a woman in her early twenties to come out. It was Ange, the one in charge of taking care of Princess Flora.

“Oh! Why, it’s Madame Yuna. Welcome, come in.”

“Is Lady Flora in?”

“She is,” said Ange, letting me in with a smile.

“The bear!” Princess Flora came running over the second she saw me, giving me a hug around the hips. I gave her a pat on the head, and she beamed up at me.

“Lady Flora,” said Ange, “you do seem to like Madame Yuna, don’t you?”

“Yes! I love her!” Her smile was so bright and honest.

“Ms. Ange,” I said, “I brought her some lunch. May I?”

“Yes, you may. I will inform the chef.”

The chef would be prepping the royal family’s lunch about now, and he was sure to be making Lady Flora’s meal too. I always tried to come early enough to tell the chef before that could be a problem, so we didn’t end up wasting food.

“Please make sure to apologize to the chef for me,” I added. I interfered with the chef’s job, after all.

“I will, but I doubt that the chef would be upset considering how ecstatic he was about that recipe you gave him the other day.”

“Good to hear. Could you take this to the chef too, then? It’s our new product.” I pulled the new breads Morin baked from my bear storage and handed them to Ms. Ange.

“I’ll get right to it. Now, if you could look after Lady Flora...” Ange bobbed her head and left.

I looked over at Lady Flora. “Hey, are you hungry?”

“Uh-huh. I am.”

“I know it’s a little early, but how about we have lunch?” I took Lady Flora over to the table in the room. She happily sat in a seat as I lined up the breads in front of her. They were still fresh out of the oven, and a pleasant aroma wafted over us.

“Can I...can I eat them?” Lady Flora’s eyes glittered as she gazed at the sweet treats.

“You can eat whatever you like, but let’s make sure you wipe your hands first.” I used a damp towel to clean off Lady Flora’s hands. As she screwed her face up deep in thought, trying to figure out which bread to eat, there was a knock at the door. It opened before we even replied. The usual crew came piling in.

The crew consisted of the head of the country—the king himself—and Ellelaura. There was also a pretty lady I didn’t recognize. Based on her clothes,

she couldn't be a servant; she wore a luxuriant and beautiful dress, nothing to work in. If I had to guess, I'd say she seemed like she was in the same position as Ellelaura.

"Oh my goodness," she said, "why...she really *is* a bear." Whoever she was, she knew about me.

"Mummy!" When Lady Flora saw the woman, she hopped out of her chair and trotted along over to the lady with a full smile on her face. Her mother? Okay, so...if she was Lady Flora's mother then...in other words, this was the queen herself.

The lady (the queen!) gave Lady Flora a gentle hug. When their faces were side by side, I could see the family resemblance. Whoa, would Lady Flora grow up to look so pretty? And jeez, that queen was pretty, um. Well-endowed?

The queen noticed my staring and came right over to me with Lady Flora. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you. I'm Kiteia, Flora's mother. I've heard so much about bears from this little one," she said, glancing down at her daughter's smiling face.

"I'm Yuna."

"Yuna, is it? May I join you? My daughter speaks constantly about you, and I've been ever so excited to meet you after all of her stories."

Not like I could say no, even if I had a reason to. The king and Ellelaura had already sat themselves down. This kind of stuff always makes me wonder what royalty is supposed to *do*, you know?

"It seems you really do dress as a bear," said the queen pleasantly.

"Uh-huh..." There. Nice and ambiguous.

"It's a cute look," she added.

"Cute!" Lady Flora mimicked, then she hugged me. "Soft." She rubbed her face into me.

"Ha ha! Seems she is quite fond of you." Once I brought Lady Flora over to the table with me, I found the king and Ellelaura there choosing bread for themselves.

“The bread looks scrumptious,” said the literal, actual monarch of the country.

“It really does. Now which shall I choose?” muttered Ellelaura.

“So hey,” I said, “hi guys, I just want to be sure, but...why’d you come here?”
The queen came to meet me, but what business did these two have with me?

“Because you stopped by of course,” the king proclaimed.

“We don’t have any other reason,” Ellelaura declared.

Which meant they had no reason. Okay, then?



Then the king picked up the bread I brought and started digging in, all without even asking if he could. “Very good.”

“Yeah, totally. But, uh, should a king really be eating food from a commoner?”

“If you really wanted to kill me, you wouldn’t even need poison. You could just chop my head right off, couldn’t you?”

“But you’re supposed to be careful about things like this, seeing as how you’re the royal family. And the bread was...I mean, I brought it all specifically for Lady Flora, so please don’t just eat it without asking.”

Lady Flora picked up a piece of bread with melted cheese. “I want this one.”

“That looks delicious too,” said the regent of the realm.

“You wanna eat some, Daddy?” Lady Flora offered the bread to the king and tilted her head to the side.

“Ha ha, I’m fine. I’m already eating this one.” The king gave Lady Flora a happy little pat on the head.

“Ah, may I have this one, then?” The queen picked up an egg sandwich.

“Please,” I said, “eat anything you’d like.”

“Ah, so she gets special treatment?” the king said.

Hey, I just met her. I had to make *some* effort.

“In that case,” said Ellelaura, “I’ll have the same thing.” She picked up an egg sandwich like the queen.

As they were all eating, there was a knock at the door and there was Ange with the drinks. For some reason, she’d prepped a ton of cups.

“Thank you for always taking such good care of my daughter,” the king said to me.

“Nah, no need. As long as she’s happy, it brings me joy.”

“My,” said the queen with a chuckle, “you really do wear such a cute bear outfit. Flora went on and on, telling me how ‘the bear was cute,’ but! Oh, that little tail! Delightful.” The thought of me coming up as a topic of family

conversation was gonna make me blush. I wished they wouldn't talk about that stuff, but I couldn't just forbid Lady Flora from talking about me.

"Still, you do some very amusing things," the king said. Since I had no idea what he was talking about, I just nibbled on my bread. "Oh, I mean the tunnel and Mileela. Cliff seemed absolutely exhausted when he came to report about that the other day," the king said with a hearty laugh.

"Is Cliff still in the capital?"

"He's already left. Grumbling all the while about a mountain of work he needed to finish, to boot," said Ellelaura.

"Yeesh. Seems tough being a lord."

"You speak as though you had nothing to do with it."

I mean, I *didn't*.

"If Cliff collapses due to overwork," said Ellelaura, "you *will* take responsibility for that, won't you?"

"What, would you rather I close up the tunnel?" If I did that, Cliff's workload would dry up.

The king cut in: "I can't have that. Cliff will just have to do what he can."

"In that case," I said, "I think the responsibility lies with you, Your Majesty."

I successfully passed the buck to the king. Man, that felt *good*.

Ellelaura nodded. "Then perhaps I'll head back to Crimonia in order to lend my husband a hand?"

"Ah, no need. We've arranged to send people to Crimonia. He'll just need to do what he can with the people he has until then."

"Oh, really?" Ellelaura's mouth tightened, as if she was fighting a frown. "And here I was thinking I could finally go back."

I put a pancake in front of Lady Flora and loaded it with just *devastating* amounts of honey.

"Bear, what's that?" she piped up.

“This is a pancake. They are very delicious.”

Lady Flora gripped a fork with her tiny hand and dug into the honey-laden hotcakes. Since the adults were wistfully looking at the pancakes, I brought some out for them, too. Once Lady Flora finished eating and looked satisfied, I brought out my second gift.

“Lady Flora,” I said, holding out a book, “this is for you.” Across the front of the book, in huge letters, it said: *The Bear and the Girl, Volume Two*.

“It’s the bear book!” Lady Flora happily accepted it. The moment she did, Ange, who was behind her, leaned forward and stretched her neck to catch a glimpse of it.

“Ange?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Weird. I wonder what that was about?

“Is this a continuation of the book I saw earlier?” the king asked.

“Lady Flora liked it, so I wrote up the next part.”

“A jack-of-all-trades, eh? You’re a first-rate adventurer, a top-notch magician, a fine cook, and a picture book artist on top of it all.”

“Drawing is just a hobby though.” There were tons of better artists in this world.

The king spoke up: “I have a request, Yuna.”

“What’s that?”

“I would like to make copies of the book you drew. There are many who want to read it; I keep receiving requests for its loan. You could probably sell copies throughout the country.”

“Who exactly wants my book?” There was only one copy of it in the whole world. I hadn’t thought anyone would find out about that book.

“Mostly the women with children who work in this castle, but lately, some of the men want it for their families too.” As though to prove his point, Ange took

peeks at the book from behind Lady Flora.

“Your drawings are so striking. Several people have already asked me about the book too,” Ellelaura said.

“But why does everyone know about the book I gave Lady Flora?” I thought Ange would be the only one who could enter this room.

“Lady Flora is always happily carrying it around with her,” said the king.

“Is she really?”

Ange nodded. “When the weather is nice, she’ll bring it to the garden and have her servants read it to her.” Whoa, had Lady Flora really been doing that? I mean, it wasn’t like I could ask her to stop. Here she was, at that very moment already happily reading the new book I made her.

“And thanks to her carrying it around everywhere, the precious book you’ve made is getting dog-eared,” Ellelaura added. “It would be such a relief if we could make a copy for her to carry around.”

I supposed it would be a shame if the book I made for her disintegrated and she couldn’t read it anymore. Copies could preserve it; just like someone photocopying something important or keeping their favorite stuffed animal from childhood in a box for safekeeping.

“In that case,” I said, “sure you can.” (Behind Lady Flora, Ange looked ecstatic.) “But please only distribute it among the people in the castle.” It made me embarrassed to think that people were reading it, so I really wanted to limit the readers to the people who already wanted the book.

“Why’s that?” asked the king. “If you sold it throughout the country, it would fly off the shelves.”

“Well,” I said, looking for the right words, “isn’t it kind of embarrassing to have something you made circulating all across the country?”

“Why are you saying that now, of all times? And in that outfit?”

I guess this onesie was embarrassing even in another world. Since everyone interacted with me like I was normal lately, I’d almost convinced myself otherwise.

“Your outfit isn’t embarrassing, Yuna. It’s cute,” said Ellelaura.

“Bear, you’re cute!” cried Flora happily.

“Yes,” said the queen, “you’re extremely adorable.”

Why was it that their words didn’t make me happy? A bear outfit might look good on a little girl like Lady Flora, at least. Maybe I’d bring one of the bear jackets from the shop over for her? I thought the queen would get a kick out of it. Heck, it might even annoy the king.

They talked me into it: I allowed my book to be mass produced.

“Once you print them,” I said, “could you give me some books too?” Since they were already going to the trouble of printing them, I figured I might as well give the orphans some copies. There were some little kids there who still couldn’t read, and I could use this to get them to study.

“Sure. How many would you need?”

“Maybe about ten of them?”

“What will you do with so many books?”

“If Lady Flora is enjoying the book that much,” I said, “I thought I could give books to the orphans.”

“In that case, of course. Ellelaura, I’m leaving that up to you.”

Ellelaura nodded. “I will place the request immediately.”

And that’s how a snack run for a kid turned into a limited run for a kids’ book hitting bookstore shelves.

Chapter 113:

Picture Book:

The Bear and the Girl,

Volume Two

THE LITTLE GIRL looked after her mother today too. She found herbs, so her mommy got a little better. It was all thanks to the bear.

The girl headed into the woods again to make more medicine. When she got there, she called, “Bear, oh, bear!”

After a while, the bear came out from behind the trees. The bear would stay with the girl when she went to gather herbs. If the bear was there, the woods were safe.

The bear let the girl ride on its back, and took her to the place where herbs grow.

“Is your mother okay?” the bear asked.

“She’s doing better, thanks to you!”

(It was a secret that the girl and the bear could talk to each other.) “Bear, thank you for everything.” The girl hugged the bear happily.

Instead of answering, the bear galloped faster.

Then, before they knew it, they were in the place where herbs grow. The girl got off the bear and picked the herbs.

She gathered lots of herbs today!

Now, the girl once heard a story about a flower that glittered like a rainbow, far up north on the mountains. People said that drinking the dew from that flower could heal any illness.

“Maybe it could heal my mother too,” the girl said to herself.

But the stories said that the flower was in a far-away village, and a dangerous

one too. Many people had looked for it, but no one had found it.

Was it real? Or was it just a story?

One morning, the girl's mother was very sick.

The girl tried giving her mother medicine, but she just kept coughing. The girl's mom started to hold her chest because it hurt.

The little girl's littler sister hugged their mother. "Mom!"

The mother opened her eyes real slow.

"I'm sorry. I really am."

What was she sorry for?

The little girl didn't understand at all...

"I'm sorry. I really am."

...but she just kept saying sorry.

"Mom," the girl said to herself, "why are you sorry?"

After that, her mom couldn't get out of bed anymore, but the brave girl still went to gather herbs for her mom. It was the only thing the girl could do for her, after all.

"Bear, do you think my mom will get better?"

The girl tried not to cry, and the bear hugged her gently. The bear's fur was so warm and comforting.

"Bear, do you know about the rainbow flower?"

The bear shook its head.

The girl told the bear about the story.

"They say it's in a mountain to the north. They say it's a rainbow flower. Oh, they say it's very pretty, and its droplets will cure any sickness. Oh, bear, do you think it might make my mom better?"

The girl wondered, gripping a small bottle in her pocket.

Then, several days later, the girl came to the woods like she always did. There were so many herbs growing there that day.

“Bear?” The girl called out... “Bear! Bear!”

...but no matter how many times she called, the bear would not come.

“Bear! Bear!”

No matter how long she waited, the bear wouldn’t appear.

The little girl was sad, but she had to take the herbs and go home.

After that, the girl went to the woods every day.

She went when it was sunny and she went when it was gray. She even went in the rain, all to wait for the bear in the woods.

But no matter how many times she called for the bear, no matter how long she waited, the bear wouldn’t be there.

“Bear...”

Soon enough, the little girl’s mother couldn’t talk very well.

She got sicker and sicker.

The little girl held her littler sister while praying to God: *Please, somehow save my mom.*

I don’t care what happens to me, as long as she’s okay.

The next day, the little girl went to the woods again. She watered the herbs with her many tears.

Today she was too tired to call for the bear. The bear was gone, and her mom wasn’t getting better. She thought of going deep into the woods and going to sleep.

“Bear, I’m so tired.”

Right then, she heard the grass deep in the woods moving...

“Bear!”

...but out came a wolf.

The little girl didn't even have the strength to run away.

She thought: “Maybe I shall die here.”

But then she remembered her mom. The little girl remembered her littler sister's face.

“Sorry,” she said without realizing it.

Was that why her mom had said sorry? Had she felt this way?

Sorry for dying.

She imagined her sister crying.

“I'm really sorry,” she apologized to her crying sister.

The wolf crept closer. Was this the end? But then...something jumped out!

The bear was back!

The bear attacked the wolf and drove it away.

“Bear!” The girl hugged the bear. “Bear, bear, bear, bear!”

She kept saying the bear's name, over and over again.

Tears streamed from the little girl's eyes.

“Bear, oh, bear!”

The bear gently hugged the little girl.

“Bear, where were you?” The girl looked closely. The bear was very dirty, she saw, and was hurt. “Bear, what happened?”

The bear took out a small bottle.

It was the same bottle the little girl had earlier.

The little girl dropped it somewhere.

“Bear, what is this?”

“Have your mom drink it.”

“Bear, you didn’t go to get the medicine, did you?”

“Hopefully, this will make her better.”

“Bear!”

The girl hugged the bear.

The girl called the bear’s name many times and cried.

“Bear, thank you.”

After the girl thanked the bear, she held the bottle and started running.

When she got home, she found her sister crying. “Sis, it’s mom...”

The little girl hugged her littler sister. Then she ran over to her mom.

Her mom was in a lot of pain.

She opened the lid of her bottle and put it to her mom’s lips.

A shimmering, transparent liquid went into her mom’s mouth.

Relief came over her mom’s face. Her mom wasn’t in pain anymore.

“Mom!”

The little girl’s mom slowly opened her eyes.

“Mom! Mom!”

The little girl and her littler sister hugged their mom.

The mom gently hugged the little girl and the littler sister back.

The little girl thanked the bear in her heart.

Thank you, bear.

Chapter 114:

The Bear Is Asked for Something by ElleLaura

“**S**O, YUNA,” said ElleLaura, once we were done discussing the picture book, “I had something I wanted to ask of you, too. You’re not doing anything, right?”

Whatever she was going to ask for, it was definitely bad news if she paired it with that smile. Plus...I wasn’t *doing* anything? That seemed pretty rude, didn’t it? My schedule was full to the brim, thank you very much. Napping, playing with Fina and Shuri, eating good grub...

“Nope. I’m busy.”

“You’re not a very good liar, Yuna,” said ElleLaura. “Cliff complained all about how he was so busy, and you were still lounging around doing nothing in the middle of it.”

Ugh, Cliff, you blabbermouth. “I’m an adventurer,” I said, “so I’ve got to work. Keep my schedule open and all. Plenty of monsters to kill.” Admittedly, the only monster this here adventurer was killing was time...

“Oh, that works out fine. This is adventuring work.”

“And you know, I’ve got that shop to mind, and the orphans too.” Minding the shop (and eating the good food there). Seeing to the orphans (to play with them). Such a busy schedule. My work-life balance was totally broken.

“I heard that you’ve left the shop and orphanage in other people’s hands, though.”

“Now, uh.” Everything about me was out in the open. Cliff had to be the leak. See, this is why I don’t like hearing that people are talking about me! “You *could* say that,” I said weakly.

“Now, about that favor...”

“I still haven’t agreed to anything.” Resistance was futile, but I had to try.



“Just hear me out, would you? I want you to guard the students from the academy.”

“Guard the students?” Not at all what I expected. I was dead certain it was gonna be another monster to fight or something.

“The students are going on practical training exercises pretty soon. Don’t worry, it’s nothing extravagant. All they have to do is head to a nearby village and come back.”

“That’s it?” I thought this’d be a real pain in the neck if Ellelaura was the one asking me for it, but it sounded pretty simple.

“Yes, that’s it. Just guard the students. I tried putting in a quest at the adventurers’ guild, but I just haven’t been able to get anyone who can do it. A lot of the students will be girls from respectable families, so it’s vital that we have someone capable.”

“If they’re that important, why have them do something that dangerous in the first place?”

“We’ve limited the participants to the most skilled students of the academy, so they can protect themselves to a certain extent. You’re there just in case there’s something they can’t handle.”

“The goal of this experience,” the king added, “is to demonstrate that it’s dangerous outside of the capital, that rash actions are perilous, and that having a guard is essential.”

Ellelaura nodded. “We’re teaching them the hardships that come with travel. How to ride a horse, how to make camp and rough it, the danger posed by monsters, and the importance of trusting their travel mates as well as their guard.”

“Okay, I guess I get why you want them to do this, but why isn’t the academy guarding them? Why’re you gathering adventurers for this, Ellelaura?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” said Ellelaura. “I do odd jobs for the academy.” Odd jobs? Really? I remembered she mentioned something about doing odd jobs at the castle too, a while ago. What was Ellelaura’s *actual* job?

“Cool, I get what you’re asking, but...it doesn’t need to be me then, does it? You’ve got time before the practical, right?”

“Yes, but we want to secure the guards earlier rather than later—better to get ahead of a deadline than to let it catch up with you. And there aren’t as many adventurers as you might think who can fulfill an escort job...at least not people who not only have the ability and time, but the skill to ignore snide remarks from aristocratic children. One of our students once said something thoughtless that so upset the adventurer that they abandoned the children partway through the trip.”

Yeesh. “What happened to that group?”

“There was one person who ended up seriously injured, but it wasn’t life-threatening. Rather traumatizing for the others though, I’d say.”

“Ha. That disqualifies me, then. If they give me crap, I’ll just stick them in a goblin’s nest.” I couldn’t do an escort quest without my bear onesie either: they’d definitely make fun of me, and I wasn’t about to hold my tongue and play bodyguard to jerks like that. If I had to deal with the snot-nosed kid of some corrupt aristocrat—like the guy who embezzled the orphanage funds or something—I’d give them my special wilderness survival training. (I’d leave them stranded in the woods.)

Ellelaura shrugged. “My daughter will be there too. If you could beat a little sense into her, that’d be fine with me.”

That did change things a little. “Shia’s going to be there too?”

“Yes, she’s participating in the training this time around. And she’s also the child of an aristocrat. She’ll be in a position of power someday, and she has a lot of things to learn.”

Yeah. Okay, now I was starting to follow.

“Yuna, do you mind if it’s Shia?”

Nah, not at all. She knew about me, so I doubted she’d make fun of me. “It’s not just Shia, right?”

“No, it’s not. You’d guard between four to five students.”

Yeah, I had no doubt it'd be a pain in *some* way. "Would the students even accept having a girl like me guard them? If I'm guarding Shia, then we're looking at girls the same age as me or even older, right?" I'd be one of their peers to them, or worse, guarding a bunch of rich kids...and also, I was a little shorter than other kids my age. Just a bit, no big deal or anything, but...you know?

"I'll pull some strings if I have to. Don't worry about that."

Pulling strings? Well, Ellelaura *was* an aristocrat and working in the castle, so she had to be pretty powerful, but...she was really going to swing her influence around just so people would accept me as a guard?

Just monarchy things, I guess.

The king spoke up. "I think Ellelaura is more than capable of using her influence, but why don't I help as well?" You've gotta be kidding me, the *king*? That'd be like the students got an order from the president or prime minister in my world.

"Oh, that seems entertaining," the queen mused. "Perhaps I'll put a word in, too."

"Me too!" Flora piped in. Even Lady Flora mimicked them now. Jeez, these three good-for-nothing adults were a bad influence on little Lady Flora.

"But you don't need me or other adventurers guarding them," I said. "You could have the castle guards or the mages do it. Why don't you let them take care of it?"

"But it would be no fun if..." Ellelaura coughed loudly. "Or rather, you know, there wouldn't be any point to the test." Now that was a heck of a slip-up. Was this whole thing just for fun?! "Since some of the students have parents who work at the castle," she said quickly, "they won't feel free to act naturally with their parents around. Which is vital for the test. And such."

Uh-huh. Sure, Ellelaura.

"Also," she added, "we've hired adventurers for this every year. It's far too late to change such a tradition." And now it sounded like even more of a pain in the neck. "Yuna, please. We'll pay you handsomely for the quest."

“Sounds annoying, so I’ve got to say no.”

Ellelaura nodded slowly. “In that case, how about I...owe you one for it? I know it’s presumptuous of me to say, but I’ve never owed a favor to anyone.”

Hmm. Now *that* was interesting, but there was nothing I needed to ask Ellelaura for. Ooo, but maybe I could ask her to tell me one of her secrets? That sounded fun, if a little scary to think about.

“My favors,” she said with a pleasant smile, “are worth a lot more than dear Cliff’s.” Okay, she had more worth than Cliff, a freaking feudal lord? What *was* she?

It was irresistible. “All right, just this once. But I have one condition.”

“Did you want to—what were your words?—stick them in a goblin’s nest? You surely know I can’t *possibly* allow that.”

“Nah, that’s not it.”

“Then what is it?”

“Could you ask Shia to back me up?”

“Back you up?”

“To avoid any, like, goblin nest situations.”

She chuckled. “Got it, yes. I’ll include that as part of the test.” Guess things would be all right with Shia around. Hurray?

“Good. Well then, practically speaking, what do you need me to do?” Just guard them?

“Fundamentally, we want you to keep the students safe, but I suppose we’d also like you to report on the students’ actions.”

“Report on them?”

“If my daughter skipped out on helping set up camp, for instance. If she went off to fight a monster that appeared all on her own, if she didn’t follow your instructions as her guard...things like that.”

A report on their behavior, huh? So I was kind of like a cross between a proctor and a spy for whoever did the real grading.

“Also,” she continued, “if any of them insult you, please report on that too. We’ll deduct points for that.”

What a relief. “How should I deal with any monsters that crop up?”

“Just help them if it seems like they’re in danger.”

“How good are the students at handling themselves? Are we talking two-goblin-fighters or maybe a hundred?”

“You’re the only one who can fight a hundred goblins, Yuna. If there are more monsters than students, please deal with them yourself. If there are the same number of monsters, on the other hand, just keep an eye on them. Self-defense is part of the practical exam. I don’t think you’ll come across anything stronger than lower-rank monsters, but if you do, please do protect the students.”

Uh, goblins and wolves were low rank, right? What were orcs again? Guess I could just ask Shia about that stuff, huh?

Ellelaura gave me the details on the practical training—when it would be happening and stuff—and I ended up accepting. Sounded fine, but I really couldn’t help feeling a little anxious.

With talks out of the way, Ellelaura borrowed *The Bear and the Girl, Volume 1* from Lady Flora and left the room. Ellelaura sure did take a lot of odd jobs, but she was close with the king, so...I guess it was fine, even if it was a real mystery to me.

The king and queen left, and—alone now with Lady Flora and Ange—I decided it was about time for me to take off too.

“I’ll come by again, though, don’t you worry.”

“Thank you for the book, Bear!” She happily hugged the new book.

“I’m just happy you’re happy.”

Ange bowed her head. “Thank you so much for everything you did for Lady Flora today, and, ah...Madame Yuna, thank you for what you did with the picture book, too.”

“I knew you wanted one too, Ange.” It was pretty obvious with how she kept trying to catch glimpses as Lady Flora read.

“Yes, the images are just so *cute*! When Lady Flora showed them to me, I just knew my own daughter would love it too.”

“You have a daughter? How old is she?”

“The same age as Lady Flora. That’s why I was able to be a wet-nurse for Lady Flora.”

“Well, I don’t have any other picture books, but you can bring this home to your daughter.” I pulled out a pudding, along with one of my more popular types of bread.

“Are you sure?”

“Mmhm. Make sure to eat the pudding after chilling it. You can eat the bread as is, though.”

“Thank you ever-so-much.”

And with that, I left the castle to get a little shopping done in the capital before heading back to Crimonia. Man, I forgot how much people stared at me in the capital, though...

Chapter 115:

The Bear Goes Out With the Sisters

SEVERAL DAYS after coming back from the capital, I heard the tunnel was basically done, so I thought I'd take a day trip to Mileela. I wanted to get my hands on a certain ingredient.

It'd be a lonely trip...but then I remembered that Fina wanted to see the ocean, so I headed over to the orphanage to invite her along. Fina and Shuri worked at a lot of different locations to help out. They watched over the little kids at the orphanage, helped them take care of the kokekko, lent a hand at the Bear's Lounge, harvested my monsters, and did all kinds of odd jobs.

For the time being, I headed over to Tiermina at the orphanage, who would probably know where they were. I found the orphans collecting eggs in the henhouse. They'd wash the collected eggs with water and put them away in the cases I made using earth magic.

"Morning everyone!"

"Bear girl!"

"Oh, good morning!"

"Yuna!"

They ran right over to me, shouting happily. Looked like everyone was doing their part. They were carefully holding the eggs, feeding the birds, cleaning up the henhouse, and each doing what work they could. Liz divided up the tasks according to their ability. The bigger kids did the heavy lifting, and the ones who were good with animals took care of the birds.

These kids had all either lost their parents or been abandoned, so they'd convinced themselves they didn't need anyone to care for them. Liz and the headmistress were slowly teaching them to trust again.

Liz herself came over to me. "Ms. Yuna, good morning."

"Morning, Liz. How are the kids?"

"They're good kids, so everything has been going great. They know what

keeps them fed, after all.” Liz helped teach them that.

“Cool. If you need more help or anything else, just let me know.”

“We’re doing fine. The kids and I are all happy thanks to you. Asking for anything else would just upset this little harmony we have going,” Liz answered back with a joyful smile.

“Don’t say that. Actually, tell me if you need anything, okay? If something bad happened to you or the headmistress, that’d be a disaster.” I wasn’t exaggerating either. If either of them passed away or something, the orphanage would be in hot water. The two of them were pretty much the orphans’ parents and older sisters rolled into one—basically the only, and therefore precious, family they had.

“I mean it,” I added before heading out. “Tell me if you actually do run into any issues.” Then it was off to the shed next to the henhouse, where I found Tiermina counting eggs with Fina and Shuri. Looked like it was orphanage work for them today.

“Ah, Yuna! You’re here awfully early today.”

Usually I’d pop in at the shop for the mornings and eat breakfast before coming over to the orphanage. I hardly ever came here first thing. “Could I borrow Fina for a bit?”

“Oh, you can borrow her anytime.”

Fina pouted. “M-Mom!”

Tiermina chuckled as Fina gave her little, harmless bops. “So, why do you need Fina?”

“I’m going out for a little, and I didn’t want to go on my lonesome.”

“Where are you going?”

“I was thinking of heading to Mileela.” Word about the tunnel spread pretty widely throughout Crimonia, so of course Fina knew about it by now.

“You wanted to go, Fina, didn’t you?”

Fina seemed troubled as she looked at Tiermina and Shuri. Her face said she

did want to go.

“Don’t worry about this,” said Tiermina gently. “Just go on.”

“But the eggs...”

“I’m fine. I’m normally doing this alone,” Tiermina said.

“Okay. Thank you, Mom,” said Fina, and gave Tiermina a huge hug.

“All right! Time to borrow your little girl, then.”

Tiermina laughed. “You can take her anytime.”

“Mom! Yuna!” Fina shouted, looking embarrassed.

“Wish I could go, sis.” Shuri looked at us sulkily.

Oh, hmm...leaving Shuri behind would sure be sad. “Could I take Shuri too?”

“Are you sure she wouldn’t get in your way?” Tiermina looked at Shuri worriedly.

“Nuh-uh, I won’t do nothing to get in the way!” Shuri said with a pouty little kick at the ground.

“How about we go together then?” I said.

“Really?” Shuri perked up. I felt bad for Shuri—I always took Fina places with me, but this time there wouldn’t be anything dangerous about our trip. I didn’t see any problems with taking Shuri.

“Yuna, are you sure you want to also take Shuri?”

“Yeah, it’s no biggie.”

“If you’re sure. Now, you two, make sure you behave for Yuna.” The two happily nodded and, just like that, I successfully got myself some extra hands to help me get certain ingredients. Heheheh. “You make sure you enjoy your time alone with Gentz, Tiermina.”

Sure, they’d gotten married, but they probably never had a chance to be alone together with both Fina and Shuri around. Since Tiermina always helped me out with stuff, I had to occasionally return the favor, you know?

Tiermina turned bright red and glanced at a spot on the ground. “Yuna...”

I left the shed—we were gonna head out right away. It wasn't like I needed to prep anything in particular. The two girls seemed happy about getting right to it.

"Sis, Yuna, hurry!" Shuri ran ahead of us, Fina following close behind.

Hmm, how would we get to Mileela? I considered using the transport gate even though Shuri was with us...

"Yuna," Shuri piped in, her eyes glittering, "are we going on the bears?"

"What, do you want to ride them?"

"Uh-huh." She nodded meekly.

I'd shown Shuri my bears and let her climb on them before, but never taken her on a ride. "Bears it is, then."

"Yeah!" Shuri was all smiles. I took the two out of the town, summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu, and Shuri squealed at the sight. "It's Kumayuruuuuu!" Shuri tottered over to Kumayuru and hugged the bear. Kumayuru sat down on the ground tolerantly as Shuri grasped and pulled at its fur.

"Shuri," I said, "we're gonna go soon. Hurry and get on."

Fina pushed her little sister up onto Kumayuru and then climbed on herself. Once they were both on, Kumayuru slowly stood up. Shuri looked like she was having the time of her life on top of Kumayuru. "Whoa! We're so high!"

"Shuri," I said, "don't make a fuss. That's not being nice to Kumayuru."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Kumayuru," said Shuri, giving Kumayuru an apologetic pat. Watching the two happy sisters, I got onto Kumakyu and we headed out for Mileela.

This was Shuri's first trip out, so we went on a slow run. I guess she enjoyed herself, since she made an energetic fuss on top of Kumayuru. Fina, sitting behind Shuri, was doing her darndest to tell Shuri to be good.

"Kumayuru, faster!" Shuri cried.

Kumayuru crooned and went slightly faster.

“This is so *fast*!”

“Shuri, don’t wiggle,” Fina cautioned, “it’s dangerous.”

Shuri acted like she was on top of the world...for a while, anyway. She grew quieter and quieter, and started to doze off. Riding the bears was like sitting on a warm, high-quality combination-blanket-and-rocking-chair, so it was easy to get sleepy.

“Fina, we’re going to go a little faster, okay?”

“Kay.” They wouldn’t fall even if they fell asleep, but Fina still hugged Shuri carefully to make absolutely sure.

The bears sped up.

Eventually, Shuri rubbed her eyes as she looked around herself. “This is...”

“We’re almost at the tunnel,” I said.

“The tunnel?” Shuri repeated.

“Mmhm! I’ve heard about it. They made a huge tunnel in the mountain. If you go through it, you’ll apparently see the ocean.”

“Oh-shen?” Shuri looked around. “Are we at the ocean already?”

“Almost, I think!”

When we got to the patch of forest outside of the tunnel, the woods were cleared. Used to be you’d need to go right through the woods first, but they cut down the trees and leveled the place. There was enough room for a carriage to get through now.

I had Kumakyu walk slowly so I could get a look around. They did a great job leveling the place—had they used mages? I could hear the sound of trees being felled coming from far off. When I got closer to the tunnel, I started seeing a few people—I guess they were from Crimonia, since they’d wave when they saw me. Shuri saw that and waved her hand wildly back. Agh, super cute.

We got to the tunnel. The area around it was mostly cleared out now; the trees around it disappeared and they put up shed-like buildings. The thing that stood out the most to me was a bear statue standing next to the entrance. The

cartoonified bear held a sword and stood as though protecting the tunnel.

“There’s a bear?” said Fina.

“It’s a bear!” Shuri jumped off of Kumayuru and ran over to the bear statue.

“Yuna, what is this?”

“Please, *please* don’t ask.” And she actually *did* refrain from asking. I was happy she was being considerate.

As we made a fuss in front of the statue, a worker came out from the shed. “I wondered what that racket was. So it’s you, bear girl. What are you doing in a place like this?”

“I hoped to go to Mileela. I’ve got Cliff’s permission, so could I go through the tunnel?” I had indefinite free tunnel usage marked on my guild card. Since I had the bear transport gate, I doubted I’d use it all that often, but it wasn’t like I had a reason to turn it down.

“I heard that from Lord Cliff,” said the man, “but we haven’t finished setting mana gems into the tunnel. There are dark spots. If you’re fine with that, then you can go through.”

“I’ve got magic, so I’ll be fine.” Wait, hold on. “Did you really hear about me from Cliff?”

“All the foremen here have. He told us that if we saw a girl in a bear costume, we should let her through.” Very gracious of him. “Also, if you’re going in, there are construction workers doing their jobs in there. Please don’t spook them. They’d be startled for sure if a bear just suddenly appeared behind them.”

Who wouldn’t, honestly?

We headed into the tunnel. Since there were mana gems set up at the front at regular intervals, it was pretty bright. Green and brown mana gems were set up in regular intervals to go along with the light mana gems—man, this must’ve really cost a pretty penny.

Shuri looked all around as though the tunnel itself was a spectacle. As the bears ran, the light cut off and the back of the passage darkened. When we

slowed down and kept going forward, we found people at work installing the mana gems.

“What’s going on?!” One of the workers noticed us and looked our way. “A bear?!”

“No, it’s the bear girl.”

“Ugh, don’t scare me like that!” It felt weird that they knew about me, even though I didn’t know them. Was this how celebrities felt?

“Bear girl,” one of the workers called, “are you going up ahead?”

“I’m planning to. Can I?”

“I don’t mind, but as you can see it’s kind of dark.”

“I’m fine. Got magic.” I summoned up a bear light.

“I see. Make sure you’re careful, though.”

“Thank you,” I said. Fina bobbed her head, Shuri waved, and we left the construction worker. We lit the rest of the way using the bear light and, as though she’d grown bored of seeing the same scenery, Shuri went back into sleep mode.

We went faster on our way to the exit of the tunnel and, eventually, I saw a small light in the distance.

“Fina,” I said softly, “wake Shuri up. Once we exit, we’ll see the ocean right away.”

Fina shook Shuri. “Sis?” Shuri said, rubbing her eyes.

“It’s the exit. It looks like we’ll be able to see the ocean soon, so wake up.”

“Uh-huh,” Shuri answered and looked ahead.

And Kumayuru and Kumakyu broke out of the darkness of the tunnel.

Chapter 116:

The Bear Gets Employees

WHEN WE GOT OUT of the tunnel, we found the place cleared of trees: we could see the distant, azure water sparkling at us. The ground was level, the trees were gone, and the ocean spread out before us.

“Is that the ocean?” Fina gasped.

“The oh-shen?” The two of them got off of Kumayuru and gazed out at the blue sea in the distance. The weather was nice and cloudless, and the horizon was clear.

Good thing it was sunny. The first time I saw the ocean, the skies were gloomy and gray, rain came down, the wind howled, and the waves crashed, which might’ve all been a traumatic experience for me, you know?

While we were looking out at the beautiful body of water, someone called out to us. “Is that you, bear girl?”

Huh? It was just...some guy, walking from a hut-like structure. “Umm.” I didn’t recognize him.

“I’m from Mileela. You sure gave me a scare, coming out of the tunnel out of nowhere like that.”

“It’s nice to see you...again?” I tilted my head.

“I know you, but you don’t know me, so don’t worry about it. What’s going on?”

“I came by to show these kids the ocean.” I placed my bear puppets on Fina and Shuri’s heads.

“You wanted to show them the ocean?” the guy repeated. “Is looking at the plain old ocean actually all that fun? I know the lord of Crimonia said that, but I just don’t get why you’d come all the way over here just for that.”

“That’s because you see it every day. It’s really emotional for people seeing it

for the first time.”

“Really, now?” The man seemed unconvinced. I guess anyone could get sick of seeing a beautiful landscape if that was just every day. “What do you two think of the ocean?”

“It’s very big!” said Shuri.

“It’s pretty,” said Fina.

“Is it, now?” The man nodded thoughtfully. “When you put it like that, it’s like you’re giving everyone in Mileela a compliment. Thanks.”

We split from the guy shortly after and took our time taking in the scenery on our way to the seaport. Fina and Shuri spent the entire time gazing at the ocean from atop Kumayuru.

“How about we take a quick pit stop?” I suggested. I had my bears head to a spot on the beach. The two hopped off of Kumayuru and headed toward the shore, where the waves were crashing.

“It’s big,” said Fina.

“Is all of that water?”

“It’s saltwater.”

“It’s salt?!” The two of them slowly approached the ocean.

“Make sure you don’t get wet,” I called. The small waves crashed at their feet. They touched the shore with their hands, felt the waves surging in.

“It’s cold,” said Shuri. They licked the saltwater on their hands.

“It really *is* salty.”

“Sis, it’s salty!”

They stuck out their tongues while making their way back to me, so I pulled out some freshwater from the bear storage for them to rinse their mouths. After drinking the water, they headed right back to the ocean.

Since the sun would set soon enough, I called them back over. “All right, let’s get to the seaport before it gets late.”

They agreed, came back to me, and we climbed on the bears to head out for the seaport.

Just the same as Crimonia, development on Mileela's side of the tunnel was coming along. The trees up to the seaport were cleared and they leveled the ground. There were piles of lumber placed here and there—would they use those to construct buildings or something?

Soon enough I caught sight of a familiar wall, and the two kids immediately saw what was inside it. Fina stared. "Yuna..."

"It's a bear," said Shuri, perking up at the sight of the bear's face from beyond the wall.

"Is that your house, Yuna?"

"How'd you guess?" I said, and Fina gave me a reproachful look for that. What? It was a compliment.

"Yuna," said Fina, "are we staying in the bear house?"

"We could do that, but I know this inn that'll serve us up some great food. I thought we could stay there tonight." Since we were already here, I wanted to have them try Deigha's cooking. If we headed to my place, we'd just end up eating the usual fare.

We headed into Mileela right away. I recalled the bears and headed to the gatekeepers. They looked surprised for a moment, but let us in. As we walked through the seaport, people called out greetings to us.

"Yuna, you're so popular," said Fina.

Shuri nodded. "Yuna, you're cool!"

This was getting embarrassing, so I tried to head over to Deigha's inn quickly. The inn was just as empty as usual when we got there—since the sea route was cleared up, I figured there'd be more people around.

"Welcome," said Anz. "Are you looking for a room, or—wait, Ms. Yuna?"

"Long time no see."

Anz was in the middle of cleaning, and she still looked a little startled. “Ms. Yuna, what happened?”

“I wanted to show these two the ocean and get some ingredients,” I said, and introduced the two behind me.

“I’m Fina.”

“I’m Shuri.”

The two of them demurely bobbed their heads.

“Oh my gosh, what cuties!”

“Yep. We came by to crash. Is that all right?”

“Hmm,” said Anz—and it wasn’t a good “hmm.”

“I think you’re aware, but we have a lot of helpers coming in from Crimonia to help with the tunnel, so our inn is at capacity.”

“We can’t stay here, then?” And here I was, thinking that the inn was empty when everyone was just out working.

“I’m sorry. You helped us so much, and I wish there were something I could do. But, Ms. Yuna, you can stay at that bear house even if you can’t stay here, right?”

Right, of course she’d know about the bear house. “I was hoping to let these two eat your and Deigha’s delicious cooking.”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem. I’ll bring out something scrumptious.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’s the least I can do to thank you,” she said, and turned to the back.

“Daaad! Can you serve something up right now?”

“I’m still prepping!”

“But Ms. Yuna is here.” I heard the patter of loud footsteps as Deigha came in from the back.

“Miss, you came by?”

“I came by. Nice to see you, Deigha.”

“Glad you came. Are those two girls your sisters?” he blurted even though we looked nothing alike.

“No, this is Fina, who I owe my life to, and her little sister Shuri.”

“Yuna!” Fina pouted and fumed. “I *know* I asked you not to introduce me like that anymore.”

“Sorry, sorry, but it’s true, isn’t it?”

“But Yuna, you were the one who saved *me*.”

“Ehh.” I shrugged. “Anyway, kids, introduce yourselves.”

“I’m Fina. Yuna has been looking out for me.”

“I’m Fina’s sister, Shuri.” The two of them bowed their heads.

“I’m Deigha. I own this inn, and this is my daughter Anz.”

“I’m Anz. Fina, Shuri, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Now that everybody knows everybody, can we get these two a taste of your cooking, Deigha?”

“Of course we can! Hurry and take a seat, you three. I’ll make you the most delicious meal we can offer.” Deigha flexed his arm and grinned toothily for no reason whatsoever.

“Dad...” said Anz. Her eyes were fed up with Dad’s antics, but she smiled. “All right, now, I’ll help out up here.”

Deigha nodded. “You’ve got something you need to ask, don’t you? Make sure you ask her yourself, all right?”

Deigha left Anz behind and headed to the kitchen. I wondered what she needed from me. She wasn’t going to turn me down about coming to Crimonia, right?

“So, Ms. Yuna...” she began.

“What is it?”

“About the shop you mentioned earlier...”

“This isn’t going to be bad news, is it?”

“No, it’s not that...” Phew. Looks like I guessed wrong, but Anz still looked a little indecisive as she turned her eyes down and spoke:

“I have a favor to ask...”

“Um, so what’s that?”

“Do you remember the women the bandits captured?”

Of course. Their families had been killed, their loved ones taken from them, and they’d been subjected to even worse. After we saved the women, I didn’t even know what to say to them...so I hadn’t really said anything.

“Would you allow them to also work at the shop? It would be a lot for me to do it alone. They’ve grown up here, so they know how to process and prep seafood. Also, it would make me really happy to travel with people I know, rather than heading over there alone...” Her voice shrank smaller and smaller.

Maybe she thought she was asking too much? More employees meant greater labor costs, and she probably knew that since her parents ran an inn. But I didn’t care about things like that. In fact, I was happy to get people who knew how to prep food.

“They all lost their families, you know?” Anz continued. “Living here just reminds them of that. But even if they wanted to leave, they don’t know anyone outside this town, they have no money, and no work. But when they heard I was going to Crimonia, they asked me to...ask you? And I am. Now.”

Well, I didn’t have any reason to say no. “All right. How many people?”

“It’s okay, I—” she paused, blinked. “—wait, are you sure?!”

“Yeah. I already planned on finding you some help, of course, but Crimonians wouldn’t know the first thing about seafood, so I was worried they’d be a burden. It’d be super helpful if you brought along people who can prep fish.”

“Thank you so much. There are four women.”

“Four, huh?”

“Is that too many?”

“No, that’s fine. It’s just that I might ask them to do some other work too.”

“Other work?”

“Basically, I want you to be ultimately in charge of the food, so I’d like other people to manage things like money and acquiring ingredients. It’d be a lot to do on your own, right?”

“Yes, I guess so. Money and supplies and such...my dad always takes care of the money, and my brother catches the fish we cook, but I suppose I’ll have to deal with those things, too, from now on.”

“Nah, there are other people in Crimonia who know about veggies and meat, so you’ll be fine. Still, they don’t know what kind of ingredients you need, so that’s why I think it’d be better to split up the work. If they end up foisting more work on you because they’re slacking off, though, I’ll chase them out. I care about your well-being here, okay?”

“Ms. Yuna...thank you so much, but I don’t think you need to worry about that,” she said with a smile. “They’re all good people. So...if all of that is okay, I’ll go help out my dad now.” Anz thanked me one more time before practically skipping into the kitchen.

After we waited a while, a delicious aroma wafted from the kitchen. Deigha brought the meals over. “Sorry for the wait. I heard everything from Anz. You keep an eye on Anz and everybody else, ya here?”

I flashed my most super-villainous smile. “Your daughter belongs to me, old man!”

“Please,” he said with a laugh, “just take her! And if you could also find me a son-in-law who can cook, that’d be great.”

“D-Dad!” Anz turned red as she whacked Deigha. Aww, did she not have a sweetheart at the seaport? Would’ve been a bummer for the guy if she had to leave, but it sounded like she was single after all. A girl like her, super cute and great at cooking...funny to think no one was seeing her.

Maybe that had something to do with the mass of muscle standing beside her.

Chapter 117:

The Bear Heads to the Large Bear House

FINA AND SHURI were savoring Deigha's cooking, and Deigha and Anz were happily watching as they did.

"Yuna, it's so yummy!"

"Mmhm! Yum!"

"Nothing a cook loves to hear more than that, let me tell ya," said Deigha, looking satisfied.

"Now, Ms. Yuna," said Anz, "what were the ingredients that you wanted that you mentioned earlier?"

"Bamboo shoots."

"Bamboo shoots?"

"From, uh...from bamboo?" Deigha interjected, looking interested.

"Yeah, that's the one. I saw some when I wandered around the seaport last time, so I came by to gather it. Since I haven't really seen any around Crimonia, I hoped to eat some fresh bamboo shoots. I've got rice too, so I was really hoping to make bamboo shoot rice," I explained.

Anz tilted her head quizzically. "Ms. Yuna, by bamboo, you do mean those green, hard things that are empty inside, right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Do you really eat things as hard as that?"

Ohhh. She didn't know what bamboo looked like before it grew out of the ground. Apparently, no one bothered to check by digging them out. Yeah, I wouldn't have tried digging the shoots up either if I hadn't known they were edible. "No, not bamboo. I mean bamboo shoots. You know, before it's fully grown."

"Can you really eat something like that?"

“Yep. It’s good. You can cook it with rice, boil it and eat it plain, or sauté it up with other stuff.”

“Are you really sure it tastes good?”

“Dead sure. It’s delicious.”

“All right then, it’s settled,” Deigha blurted. “I’m going with you!”

“Dad?!”

“A cook like me had no clue about such a tasty ingredient, and so close by! What else am I supposed to do besides collect it? If I’d known about it when that whole kraken business started up, we could’ve used that to make food.”

Oh, wow. Yeah, they might have fared a little better foodwise if bamboo shoots were common knowledge.

“In that case,” said Anz, “I’d also like to accompany you to collect bamboo shoots.”

“You can’t. I’m going. As a cook, I simply cannot forgive myself for not knowing such a delectable ingredient was right here beneath our feet. I’m going alone this time, and I’m not giving this opportunity up—not even to my own daughter. Miss, that fine by you?”

I shrugged. “Sure, but don’t get in a fight about it.” I really didn’t want to cause a family feud over bamboo shoots, of all things.

“But Dad, what are we going to do about the meals for the inn?”

“You’re trying to become a cook, too, aren’t you? You should be able to hold the fort even if I’m gone for a day.” It was a good point. Anz didn’t have a retort, and that was that...but it wasn’t as though it’d take a whole day to dig up some bamboo shoots.

I remembered a TV show I’d seen that featured bamboo shoots. They said digging the shoots up in the morning was best—it made them taste delicious and smell wonderful. When the sun hit them, that brought out the bitterness, so it was a matter of trying to beat the afternoon heat when you dug them up. You needed to get it done before noon.

“We’re going right in the morning with the sunrise to collect the shoots,” I

said, “so it won’t take a whole day.”

“You really go that early in the morning?” Deigha marveled.

“If you want the shoots to be tasty, yep.”

“In that case, Anz, I’ll help you prep for the morning so you can try serving breakfast on your own. You’re going to open shop at her place, after all.”

“Ugh, Dad, that’s no fair. I can’t say no when you put it that way,” groaned Anz. “Ms. Yuna, please take me with you next time.”

I made that promise, no problem.

“All right then,” said Deigha, flexing absently, “is there anything we need in order to get these bamboo shoots?”

“We need to dig them out of the ground, so a hoe would be great. If you just want to watch though, I’ll dig them out with magic.”

“No, no! Just like I told Anz, this is for the experience. I’ll try digging them up myself.”

As I talked things over with Deigha and Anz, the lodgers who’d finished their work came back. They looked surprised when they saw how I dressed, and I was in no mood to deal with that, so we headed back to the bear house.

I arranged to meet Deigha tomorrow at sunrise beside the village entrance, and then the kids and I were off.

We got back to the bear house where we were staying, and the kids got a better look at it now.

“Yuna, it’s so big,” said Fina.

“A big bear!”

Those were the first things that came out of Fina and Shuri’s mouths at the sight of a four-story bear house.

“But *why* is it so large?” asked Fina.

“I want to bring the orphans by to see the ocean sometime, so I needed the

rooms to be big.”

“You’re so kind, Yuna. I feel a little guilty that you only brought us when the orphans are the ones really doing the work, but you really were thinking of everyone.”

“My reasoning wasn’t that noble,” I said. “Everyone’s working hard, so it’s really more like...a corporate outing—no, an employee appreciation trip.”

“An employee appreciation trip?”

“Yeah, it’s a trip for me to thank everyone for their work.”

“Why are you trying to thank *us* though, Yuna?” Fina asked, looking perplexed.

“Everyone’s been looking after the birds, and they’ve been working at *my* shop, right?”

Fina shook her head. “No, it’s because of you that we have work at all. We can eat full meals, too, and have a warm place to sleep. If they couldn’t work there, they wouldn’t have food *or* a place to sleep. Me, my mom, and all the orphans are grateful that you let us work.”

Hmm, I just couldn’t explain why I was thanking her. Maybe it was a cultural difference? It was hard to explain. As far as Fina was concerned, she didn’t think they needed to be thanked after already being provided a job, money, food, and a place to sleep. I guess it was a matter of having different perspectives as someone who grew up in Japan versus Fina, who’d grown up in this alternate world.

“Nice of you to say, but I want to thank you and so I’m going to do it.” I gave Fina a pat on the head. “Well then, how about we get in real quick? Looks like Shuri really wants to.”

She was already running around in front of the bear house.

With Shuri running along beside us, looking stoked out of her mind, we headed in and I gave an explanation of the first-floor rooms. “If you need to use the bathroom or want water, those are on the first floor, so use them

whenever.”

Fina and Shuri seemed to enjoy looking into the rooms. “It’s so big!”

Well, the first floor *was* big enough for all the orphans to eat together... although the fridge was totally empty still. Next, I directed the two to their room.

“Yuna,” asked Fina, “what’s on the second floor?”

“Just big rooms. We’re not using those this time around, so don’t worry about it.” We went past the rooms on the second floor and I showed them to the quarters and guest rooms up on the third floor.

“You two use this room.”

“It’s so big!” Shuri cooed.

(I made each of the third-floor rooms large.)

“Do we sleep here?” asked Fina. We were the only ones here, so I picked this one for them. “Where will you sleep, Yuna?”

“I’ll be next door.” I moved over to my room; it had a big bed, a table, and a chair. I carried over the stuff that I bought at Crimonia with my transport gate a little while ago. Also, the bear transport gate happened to be connected with an internal door to the adjacent room. I mean, I wasn’t about to keep the gate out there where just anyone could see it.

“All right,” I said, clapping my hands, “tomorrow is an early day, so let’s take baths and sleep early.”

“We’re sleeping already?”

“You two have got to be tired, right? Plus, tomorrow’s really an early day. If you oversleep, I’m leaving you behind.”

We ended up heading to the bathroom on the fourth floor. The bathroom was split up properly into boy’s and girl’s sides— I’d even written out “Men” and “Women” on each of the cloth doorway curtains, which I had made in Crimonia. I brushed aside the curtain that said “Women” as I headed into the

changing room.

“This is where we take off our clothes. The bath is in the back.”

The two of them put their clothes into the clothes bins that were set up and headed to the bath. I also took off my bear clothes and followed them.

Shuri pitter-pattered over. “Whoa! It’s big. I can see outside too. But... Yuna, there isn’t any hot water in the bath.”

Oh, right. Oops. Nobody was using it, after all, and I’d just only come back. I headed over to the bear statues where the hot water spouted out and turned the mana gem that the bear had its paw on. Water came pouring out of the bear’s mouth, and I did the same to the bear on the other side.

How long would it take for the water to fill up? Well, it wasn’t like I could stand there naked the whole time, so I decided we could wash up first. “Make sure you wash yourselves and your hair before you get in.” Hopefully the bath would fill up by the time we finished rinsing off.

“Shuri,” said Fina, “don’t just look outside. You need to wash up.” She pulled Shuri, who stared the window, by the hand and brought her to the washing area.

I adjusted the temperature of the water coming out of the bear’s mouth and then also headed over. While I was scrubbing myself down, Fina and Shuri came by.

“What’s up?”

“Your hair is so long and pretty, Yuna.”

“Pretty Yuna!”

They both touched my hair. “It’s just long here, guys. It’s not a big deal.”

“I’ll wash your hair.”

“Me too!”

“I’m fine. I can do it myself.” I had a relationship with this hair of mine for many years; I could wash it on my own.

“Yeah, but you’re always taking care of us. There isn’t much I can do for you,

so I want to do this. Just tell me if I'm getting in your way." Argh, Fina looked at me with such innocent eyes. They were cleansing to my muddled heart. I don't think anybody could say no to eyes like that.

"Okay, then, can I trust my hair to you two?"

"Yes!"

"Uh-huh!"

They both sat down close together behind me and washed my hair with scrupulous care.

"How long does it take for hair to grow this long?" Fina asked.

Good question. I didn't have an answer, because I rarely even thought about it. I didn't care how it looked, so it just kept growing.

Fina touched her own hair. "Maybe I'll grow my hair as long as yours."

"I wanna grow mine too!" Shuri raised up her hands and proclaimed.

"If you guys want, sure, but it's a pain to take care of." As we talked, we finished washing up and headed to the bath.

"Yuna, it's only half full." Or even less, now that I looked at it. But considering how big the bath was, I guess we could get by just stretching out in it? Fina and Shuri laid down in it and sunk far enough into the water. I thought that wouldn't work for me since I was bigger than them, but there was enough water to cover me when I was lying down too.

I stretched out my legs and let myself sink until my shoulders were submerged. Stretching out your legs in the bath...now that's the stuff. Fina and Shuri seemed to be relishing the bath too. Baths really were the pinnacle of human culture, weren't they?

Shuri would look outside and play with the bear statue by sticking her hand in its mouth as the water came out. Me, I was just lounging in the water with an empty head until, eventually, Shuri blurted out that she was getting out.

"Sis, it's hot." Shuri's face was bright red.

"Yuna, is it okay if we get out first?"

“Fine by me. I’ve left the dryer around, so make sure you dry your hair off fully.”

“Okay.”

Fina pulled Shuri up by the hand and out of the bathroom. After I soaked in the bath for a while longer, I also got out. When I got into the changing room, Fina was in the middle of drying Shuri’s hair. Shuri seemed barely awake.

“Okay, you’re good,” said Fina.

Shuri rubbed her eyes. She sure was sleepy. “Thanks, sis.”

Beside her, Fina started drying her own hair.

I dried myself off, changed into my white bear clothes and, just as I was drying off my hair, which was longer than my hips, Fina came up to me.

“Yuna, can we go back to the room before you?”

Shuri was about to doze off behind Fina. She was full of energy just a little bit ago, but now she looked tuckered out. “Sure. Make sure you keep warm when you sleep. We’re waking up early.”

“Yeah. Good night.”

“Night, Yuna.”

“Night.”

Fina took Shuri by the hand and pulled her out of the changing room. I dried my hair off alone then headed back to my room.

A beautiful night sky greeted me through the window glass, wonderful and somehow unexpected in the way these things always are. It made me grateful I’d come here to this other world. Otherwise I bet I would’ve been a hermit in my original world.

I hadn’t looked out the window much back then.

The night wind chilled the few droplets on me from the bath, and I decided I’d summon my bears to help me sleep—we were heading out early, after all. Burrowing into bed, I whispered a goodnight that the two in the other room couldn’t hear, gave my bears a hug, and fell asleep under that sky of

possibilities.

Chapter 118:

The Bear Goes to Dig Up Bamboo Shoots

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE of my beauty sleep, I heard a light, almost apologetic knock at the door. I opened my eyes, got up, and looked out the window before remembering that oh, right, the sun wasn't up yet. Fortunately, I didn't feel drowsy since we went to bed so early. The door slowly opened and someone came in.

"Yuna, are you already awake?" Fina whispered to me.

"I am." If only just.

"Good morning, Yuna."

"Morning. Where's Shuri?"

"We went to bed early, so she's awake right now."

Guess that's how it would be, right? After all, they always woke up early with Tiermina to help out at the orphanage. If anyone was gonna have trouble getting up, it would be me.

"We'll head out after changing," I said, "so wait downstairs." I had Fina head down first, then I changed into my black bear clothes. I recalled Kumayuru and Kumakyu, who were curled up on the bed.

"Sorry for the wait," I said when I came outside. Fina and Shuri were looking out at the ocean. I guess the sunrise would be coming soon, huh? "You two aren't cold, are you?"

"I'm okay."

"Uh-huh. I'm fine."

Hopefully it wasn't too chilly—I couldn't tell either way what with the bear onesie. "If you get cold, let me know."

The two of them nodded, and we were off. Deigha already stood there at the seaport entrance, gripping a large hoe in his hand.

"Morning, Deigha," I said. Fina and Shuri echoed me.

“Right,” Deigha grunted. “Well then, let’s get to it!” He shouldered his hoe and headed to the bamboo thicket.

“Is everything at the inn all right?” I asked.

“Aye, we prepped things last night. Long as she cooks things up, Anz will be fine even on her own. If she can’t, somehow, then we’d need to retrain her before we even thought about letting her work in your shop.”

Argh. Here’s hoping Anz could handle stuff on her own, then.

Soon enough, we got to the bamboo thicket. Regal bamboo plants sprouted from the earth.

Deigha knocked on a hard bamboo stalk, making a hollow sound. “Can you really eat these things?”

“Yeah, but the ones you can eat haven’t come out of the ground yet.” I looked around for a place where the ground had risen a bit to try my luck. Maybe... there? I used earth magic to dig and boom, winner: a gigantic bamboo shoot emerged from the soil. I dug it out with precision and grace, if I do say so myself.

“So that there’s a bamboo shoot, eh? It *is* pretty soft.” Deigha took the shoot and looked it over.

“If you pull off the outer layer and draw out the bitterness, it’s edible.”

“All right, got it. So I’ve just gotta dig up the ground, right?” Gripping the hoe, Deigha started wandered off into the thick of the thicket with all the confidence of someone who’d done it a million times. Which...he presumably hadn’t, so. Hmm.

“Yuna,” said Fina, looking at the shoot, “are we digging these up?”

“That’s right. They’re really tasty.”

“Okay. I’ll work very hard, but I didn’t bring anything to dig with.”

“It’s all right. I’m going to pair you two up with my bears.” I summoned Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

“Kumayuru! Kumakyu!” Shuri ran right over to them.

“Do you two know where the bamboo shoots are?” I asked my bears. They energetically responded with “cwoom.” What else did I expect from animals—or summoned beasts, I guess?

“Well then, Fina,” I said, “you go with Kumayuru. Shuri, you go with Kumakyu.”

“Kumayuru, I’m counting on you!” Fina gave Kumayuru a gentle pat on the neck.

“Kumakyu, let’s work really hard.” Shuri practically leapt on Kumakyu to give the bear a hug.

The bears let out a joyful croon in unison.

“Kumakyu,” said Shuri, “let’s work hard so we don’t get beat by sis.”

Fina laughed. “I’m not going to be beat either. Right, Kumayuru?”

And the two were off with their bears, heading in separate directions.

Everyone was off on their own, so I guess I’d dig stuff up around here.

I paced the space, digging up the spots on the ground that were swelling slightly. I got it wrong sometimes, but only sometimes. While I was doing that, Fina and Shuri brought along their bamboo shoots.

Despite the girls being tiny, they brought in large ones and small ones—shoots of all sizes. They kept coming back with more shoots, but Deigha was nowhere to be seen. I hoped he was digging up the right spots, but he left in the middle of my explanation before I’d given him any pointers on where to find bamboo shoots, so I was a little worried.



Worried as I was about Deigha, I dug on until I felt like I was on the verge of having *too* many. When Fina and Shuri next came back, I told them we were done digging.

“You beat me, sis,” said Shuri with a disappointed sigh.

“You lost because you went a little too far out, Shuri.”

“I thought there would be tons if I went really far though!”

Fina stuck close by in order to dig, but Shuri tried digging a little further off. Because of that, she needed to carry the bamboo shoots from further away and had lost to Fina.

“It’s just logo-jistics,” said Fina proudly. “Next time, you gotta think about how far you need to carry stuff.”

“Ughh...” Shuri pouted as she hugged her partner. “Sorry, Kumakyu. We lost ‘cause of me.” As though telling Shuri not to worry about it, Kumakyu placed a paw lightly on Shuri’s head. Cute, but from far away it might’ve looked like the girl was about to be a bear snack.

Deigha, though...Deigha sure was late. Just how far could he have gone to collect the shoots? I used my detection skill to check Deigha’s location—okay, he wasn’t *that* far away. “All right, guys, I’m gonna pop over to where Deigha is, so you two just wait here.”

He wasn’t hard to find, partly because he made a whole patch of greenery look like the cratered surface of the moon...and he was digging still more holes. “Deigha, what are you doing?”

“What am I doing? I’m digging up bamboo shoots,” said Deigha, wiping his brow. “I just, ah...haven’t found any yet.”

Yep, this guy was just digging at random. “Deigha, there are tricks to finding bamboo shoots.”

“There *are*?! Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“You went off on your own before I could say anything.”

“I *did*?!”

“You did. In order to find shoots, you gotta take a good look at the ground and dig up the places where you see the dirt rising slightly.” I looked around and found a perfect spot. “Deigha, this spot here is swelling, right?”

“Yeah, looks like.”

“Try digging here.”

He dug just like I directed, and... “Oh! Would ya look at that?”

“Mmhm. It’s trying to break its way out of the ground. If it grows, it ends up becoming a hard bamboo stalk.”

“Gotcha.” Deigha dug with the hoe, making sure not to break the bamboo shoot. As he dug, we caught sight of the shoot’s entire form—it was a lot larger than I expected. “This one’s a big guy, eh?” Deigha strained and flexed and—finally—managed to dig himself a bamboo shoot.

A bamboo shoot, in the singular: we were done bamboo shoot digging for the day. Thanks to Fina and Shuri, we secured tons of them. The sun came up again, so I tried telling Deigha that we would be going home.

“But I’ve only got one.”

“We’re out of time. Even if we kept collecting them, the flavor would be spoiled.” I was pretty sure that I remembered hearing direct sunlight would bring out the bitterness in them...at least, that’s what TV and the internet said. When I explained the stuff about the flavor to Deigha, he looked disappointed, but he still listened.

“Yeah,” he grumbled, “ain’t no reason to dig up something bitter and nasty.” Truly the perspective of a cook who cared about preparing good food for his guests. “Anyway, we got a ton of ’em, so it should be fine.”

With that, I put away all of the bamboo shoots into the bear storage and headed back to the inn.

When we got to the inn, Anz looked tired. It wasn’t her expression that gave it away, but rather the bit where she was facedown on a table. “Anz?”

“Ah! WhatcanIgety—oh, Ms. Yuna,” said Anz, blinking blearily. “Welcome

back.”

“Looks like you pulled through.”

“Somehow, but I really, *really* don’t want to do this anymore.”

“Yeah, but if you couldn’t do this, you never would’ve been able to make it out on your own.”

Anz nodded. “I’m going to work hard,” she said, and stood up. “Did you get those bamboo shoots?” I pulled one shoot out of the bear storage and she looked it over. “Is this a shoot?”

I nodded. “How about we fix it up to eat it for lunch?” With that, I showed Deigha and Anz how to husk the shoots and we prepped rice.

In the middle of cooking, I slipped in a question I’d been wanting to ask for a while... “Has no one from the Land of Wa come by yet?”

“Not yet. It’s a problem, since we haven’t been getting rice and a lot of other stuff along with it. Thanks to the lord of Crimonia, we’ve got wheat flour coming in, so it’s not like we don’t have enough food...but I really miss ingredients from the Land of Wa.”

Oof. If they didn’t have any rice, I guess they’d be forced to eat fish with bread. How could anyone do that? I tried imagining eating sashimi with bread and...shudder. Nope, not right.

But then again...maybe a fish burger could be pretty good? The sauce that went with it, at least, was good. I could get fish real easy, so if I could only...err, oops, I was getting ahead of myself. Right. Bamboo shoot time, let’s go and see if I can get these suckers to taste good.

After boiling the bitterness out of the bamboo shoots, I whipped up the main course: bamboo shoot rice. I also pan-fried some shoots, flavored them, and bam: we had a meal of bamboo shoots two ways.

“Seems like you know what you’re doing,” said Deigha with an approving nod.

“Ms. Yuna, you’re so good at this.”

“Glad to hear that from two cooks.” Now I chopped away at the shoots using a knife.

“If you’re this good at cooking, do you even need me around?”

“Yeah. See, I can’t fillet a fish very well.”

Anz tilted her head. “Really?”

“I mean, I know how to cook one, but I haven’t done it much. I’ll be in trouble if you don’t come, Anz.” General knowledge was different from experience, after all.

“That’s reassuring,” she said with a smile. “There *are* things even you aren’t good at.”

“Oh, a ton. I’m an adventurer, but I can’t even butcher a monster.”

“Really, now?”

“Yep. I’ve got to ask the guild or Fina to butcher for me. Fina’s great at that.”

“That’s amazing! And she’s so small, too.”

Yep. Small, but crazy talented.

As we talked and cooked, Shuri made her way into the kitchen. “Yuuuuuuna, I’m hungry.”

Oops. We’d gone out to dig up the shoots without eating breakfast. “We’re almost done, so just wait a little longer.”

“Uh-huh, okay.” Shuri obediently left the kitchen. What a sweet, well-behaved kid...but still a *hungry* kid, so I had to whip this up quick. I sped up the cooking, and before long, I lined the table with the dishes I made.

“They look so good!”

“It’s not white today?” Shuri asked, looking at the bamboo shoot rice.

“It has the shoots you looked for today in it, Shuri. It’s really good, so dig in.”

Shuri nodded and ate some of the bamboo shoot rice. “Ohmigosh! Yuna, it’s so tasty!”

“Yeah, Yuna, it’s great!” Shuri and Fina wolfed down the food, though they seemed to enjoy every bite. It felt good, seeing them savor something I worked so hard on.

“All right if we have some too?” asked Deigha.

“I made sure to cook up enough for you.”

I lined the table with the portions of food. Naturally, I made a helping for myself, so soon enough I scarfed down shoots with the rest of 'em.

“Tasty,” said Deigha. “And it’s soft. I had no idea bamboo could be this soft.”

“Once they’ve grown,” I said, “you can’t eat them anymore.”

“Yuna, it’s yummy,” said Fina dreamily.

As for Shuri, she was way too busy eating to say anything, but that was a compliment too.

“I feel almost like you’re more of a cook than I am, Ms. Yuna,” said Anz as she dug into more bamboo shoot cuisine.

“If we could just get rice to come in more often,” said Deigha, “we’d be able to serve bamboo shoot rice at the shop.”

I shook my head. “Bamboo shoots are tasty even if you haven’t got rice.”

“Right, right. The other dishes seem tasty enough. But are you sure about this? You really don’t mind us taking all those bamboo shoots? It would help us out, but...” Deigha had only dug out one. The rest were all thanks to my magic, my bears, and the kids.

“It’s fine,” I assured him. “We found tons because of these kids. If I need more, I’ll just come by and get 'em. But Deigha, are you sure you’re okay digging them up on your own?”

“Heh. There sure was a trick to digging them up, but I’ll be fine next time. You taught me plenty, after all.”

Oh man, I hoped that was true. Then next time I came by, maybe I’d have a few meals featuring bamboo shoots...

A little bit after we finished eating, the people gathering to eat lunch came by. Since Deigha and Anz would be busy, we ducked out of the inn to stay out of their way.

Chapter 119:

The Bear Rides a Boat

AFTER GETTING BOMBARDED by our beautiful bounty of bamboo shoots, I took Fina and Shuri to explore the seaport.

“That was so good,” said Fina, patting her tummy.

“Since we’ve still got plenty of bamboo shoots, I’ll make some for Tiermina and the orphans.”

Shuri nodded. “Okay!”

As we walked around, we spied one of those harem parties—you know the kind, with the buff leader guy and a bunch of ladies, like something out of a self-insert light novel. I knew these guys, actually. The dude was Blitz. Then there was the beautiful Rosa, the petite and cute Ran, and the gallant swordswoman Glimos.

“I’ve spotted Yuna!” Rosa yelled, and ran over to us. “Deigha told us you were over here.”

“You guys are all still in town?” I thought they’d leave after finishing the food convoy.

“The guild master asked us to stick around for a while, since they’ve got some monster extermination jobs coming up.”

“But more importantly,” Blitz butt in, “is it true? They said you defeated the kraken, but...really? The kraken?”

“Blitz,” Rosa chided, “come on. The townspeople are saying it. Don’t you trust them?”

“Okay, but, I mean...this is the kraken we’re talking about. How could a single person beat that thing? Isn’t that a little, uh...unreasonable?”

“Maybe, but Yuna is beyond reason. She could probably beat the thing.”

Wow, Rosa, really? Beyond reason? Totally uncalled for, even if I couldn’t think of a good comeback.

“I get what you mean, Blitz,” said Ran, “but even the guild master is saying she did it.”

“I can’t think of a reason for the townspeople to lie,” said Glimos.

“But think about it *reasonably*,” Blitz protested.

Rosa shook her head. “Did Yuna look *reasonable* when she eliminated the bandits?”

“She, uh...okay, she didn’t, but...”

Oh my God, I did not ask to be verbally owned by an entire party of adventurers today. Blitz looked dissatisfied, but how dare he when *I* was the one being murdered live in front of an entire town?

“So, what’re you doing?” asked Rosa. “Didn’t you go home to Crimonia?”

“I’m just popping in with these kids.” I introduced Fina and Shuri, who were hiding behind me.

“I’m Fina.”

“I’m Shuri.”

They introduced themselves with little head bobs, seeming slightly embarrassed.

“Ooo, aren’t they little cuties!” Rosa couldn’t help but hug them. “Are they your sisters, Yuna?”

“No, but I guess they’re pretty close.”

“Yuna!”

“Ohmigosh, Yuna...”

Shuri and Fina seemed pretty happy about that, I guess.

“But they’re not dressed as bears,” said Blitz. C’mon, as if I’d let Fina and Shuri get the same weird looks I got, although...they *did* wear the bear uniforms when they helped out at the shop.

“Are you all going to be in Mileela for a while?” I asked.

“No, we’re thinking of heading over to Crimonia once that tunnel opens.”

“You are?”

Rosa nodded at Blitz. “The guild master said we just need to stick around until the tunnel is done. And since the tunnel’s there now, how could we *not* go to Crimonia?”

“A new town is just waiting for us, after all,” Ran interjected with a suave line.

“And honestly,” said Rosa, “I’d like to take a look at the town you’re living in, Yuna.”

Really? There was nothing there, though. Just a bear house, and a shop with bear statues, and an orphanage with some more bear statues—that was pretty much it. But if they were coming anyway... “If you’re stopping by Crimonia, I’ll treat you to a meal.”

“Oh, are you sure?”

“If you’re fine eating at my restaurant, that is.”

“Your restaurant?” Blitz repeated. “But aren’t you an adventurer? Fina, Shuri, does Yuna really have her own restaurant?”

“Yes, it’s a bakery. And it’s so yummy.”

“Mmhm! Yummy.”

The two of them backed me up, but Blitz and the others seemed unconvinced.

“Why have you got a restaurant?” asked Rosa.

Err. Why...why *did* I have a restaurant? “I guess that’s just how...things turned out?”

“Normal people don’t go around making restaurants just because things ‘turn out’ like that,” said Rosa.

“Yeah, but...I mean, that’s what happened.”

“Is Yuna always like this?” Rosa was no longer addressing me—now she asked Fina.

“Uh-huh! My mom says she never knows what Yuna is thinking.”

Thanks, Tiermina. Yeah, she and I were gonna have some words after this.

We parted ways with Rosa and the gang, who were headed over to exterminate monsters near the tunnels, and we made our way to the harbor; Fina and Shuri wanted to see the ships from up close.

“This is amazing,” said Fina in an excited whisper. “There are so many ships.”

“Ships!”

When we got to the harbor, the two went running off to go look at the boats docked at the port. It was past the time for catches, so there were a ton of boats docked. The girls’ eyes positively glittered. They didn’t say it out loud, but I could tell they wanted to board one. I wish I could’ve gotten them on, but I didn’t have a ship myself and there really wasn’t a way to do that.

“Sis,” Shuri gasped, “there’s a big ship over there.”

“Shuri, wait!”

But Shuri was already running. Fina went after her. Man, those two would have even more fun if I could get them on a ship, wouldn’t they? I looked around, looking for someone to ask about that, and just then a familiar couple came out from the shadows of a ship.

“Yuna?”

“Yuna!”

Ah, Yuula and Damon. We meet again.

“Yuna, you came by the seaport?”

“I got here yesterday.” I explained to them I’d come for fun by way of the tunnel.

“You came all the way from Crimonia with those little kids just for *that*?”

“That’s right.”

Damon seemed disappointed. “I can’t believe you’d just stop by here *for fun* from Crimonia. We almost died to get there, remember?”

“And now there’s a tunnel, so it’s all pretty chill.”

“I know that,” said Damon, “but it just feels...*weird*.”

“What are you talking about, Damon? Yuna saved our life, and then saved the whole seaport. What are you complaining for?” Yuula gave Damon a slap on the back.

“What are the two of you doing?” I asked. There weren’t any other sailors around, after all.

“Boat maintenance. If you don’t get that done now, you’ll be in trouble when things break down later.”

Yeah, true. Just a little hole could put a ship under after a while. Meanwhile, Fina and Shuri were staring at the ship in wonder as we talked.

“First time seeing a ship, you two?” asked Yuula.

“Yes, it’s my first time.”

“Uh-huh.”

The kids nodded.

“In that case,” said Yuula, “want to climb aboard?”

The girls were thrilled, but then they gave me a nervous look.

“Can we?” asked Fina.

“Of course,” said Damon. “We can at least do that much. Yuna did help us out, after all.”

“Would you two like to board the ship?” asked Yuula.

“I would, but...” Fina started.

“It looks a li’l scary,” Shuri finished. Yeah...if they’d never even seen the ocean before, of course they’d be a little overwhelmed. They probably were interested, but were frightened.

“Damon,” I said, “can I count on you to keep them safe?”

“Aye, of course. I’d never endanger anyone you know, Yuna.”

“That’s all I need to hear. You two go ahead and get on.”

“What about you, Yuna?” asked Fina.

“I’ll wait here.”

“But...but...” Shuri’s teeny hand grabbed my bear onesie and looked up at me with puppy-dog eyes. “...I wanna go with you!”

Argh. Irresistible cuteness. Who amongst us could stand against that? So yeah, Damon let all three of us onto the boat. With everyone onboard, Damon put up the sails and we headed into sea.

“If either of you feel sick,” I said, “let me know sooner rather than later.”

“...?” Fina tilted her head...

“...?” ...and Shuri tilted her head even more.

I wasn’t about to try to explain seasickness to them when it was their first time on a boat, so I left it at that. Still, according to Yuula and Damon, the waves weren’t that tall today. Maybe we wouldn’t have to worry about seasickness?

My fears aside, the two of them were ecstatic whenever the boat really rocked. We made a circle around the nearby stretch of ocean and came right back.

There we go, everything was fine: they didn’t seem sick at all. I hadn’t felt sick either, but maybe that was because of my bear gear?

“Damon, Yuula, thank you so much.”

“Course! I’m just happy you enjoyed yourselves,” said Damon.

“Let us know anytime you’d like a ride,” said Yuula.

We thanked Damon and left the harbor. “Did you two enjoy yourselves?”

“Yes! It was fun.”

“Uh-huh, the boat was real fun!”

With the full, bright smiles on their faces, I knew they weren’t just saying that.

The next day was our last day there, so I wanted to make sure it was a fun one before we headed back to Crimonia. “Is there anywhere you two want to go?”

We'd already gone to the ocean and ridden a boat. We'd dug up bamboo shoots, and we'd eaten Deigha and Anz's food. We met with Yuula and Damon...and now I couldn't think of where else to go, so I left it to them.

"Anywhere would be fine."

"Uh-huh."

Really? Ugh, that was the worst answer they could've had. Ah well, what can you do?

We'd probably find something if we headed into the seaport, so I decided we'd go and *then* think about it. When I held their little hands as we entered the seaport, there was a certain woman with very, uh, *chestful* clothes waiting for us.

"Atola?"

"Been a while, Yuna."

"What's going on?"

"Nothing much. I was just wondering why you didn't come to me if you were in town."

"Uhh, because I didn't need anything from you?"

Atola glared at me. "Yuna!"

"C'mon, you know I'm joking. I was just about to head over to you." I super was not joking, it was a big fat lie, and I hadn't intended to see her at all. Don't tell anyone.

"You mean it?" She looked at me dubiously.

"I do," I said, subtly averting my eyes.

"Well...fine. What did you come for?"

"Just to hang out is all." Which is why I didn't have any business with Atola—I had no reason to visit the adventurers' guild.

"You came to hang out? But there's nothing in this place."

"There's tons to do. There's seafood, bamboo shoot digging, the sea, the

boats, the beaches. You two had fun, too, didn't you?" I asked my little squad to back me up.

"Yes, it was fun."

"Uh-huh, it was fun."

"Was it? I mean, what even is 'bamboo d'—eh, whatever, I suppose I'm happy if you had fun. So, who are these kids?"

"They're the kids of..." Fina would get mad if I introduced her again as the person I owed my life to, so I tried something else. "...a lady in Crimonia who's been helping me out?"

"No we're not!" said Fina. "We're the ones that are being taken care of by Yuna."

"My mom said so. We get to eat yummy food thanks to Yuna."

Absolutely annihilated once again by children. Devastating. And now Atola was...she was laughing about it?

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Let me guess: you saved the family of these kids without asking for anything in return, am I right?"

Fina gasped. "That's amazing. How did you know?!"

"Yuna did the same thing for this seaport."

"Whoa, you really got it right!"

How were they hitting it off so quickly? And the way they summed me up so quickly made me sound so...so one-dimensional! I wanted them to back off and correct themselves, but the three of them were really getting into talking about me.

"She always says, 'Don't worry about it,' right?"

"Yeah, she does say that."

"Ohmigosh, she does."

"And that she 'doesn't need' anything in return."

“Uh-huh, that’s just like her!”

“Yeah, that’s her!”

Why were they so excited to talk about me?

“We’re the ones who need to thank her, but, for some reason, Yuna helps *us* instead.”

“Right? Every time!”

“Yuna’s so nice!”

What was with this? All this nice talk was getting me all...itchy. I’m not that softhearted, okay? The reason I helped Fina was because she helped *me* out when I got to this world and had no idea how to tell right from left. Fina taught me all kinds of things without treating me like I was ridiculous or suspicious. That’s all.

Actually, now that I thought about it, I was amazed she taught me so many things while I was wearing this bear onesie.

“And you know what Yuna did—” Fina started.

“How about we cut things short soon and head somewhere else?” I proposed, because...come on, they were probably going to just yammer on forever.

“Oh, sorry.”

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, sorry!”

The three of them apologized. Ugh, now I felt like the bad guy here.

“What are you going to do now, Yuna?” asked Atola.

“I *was* going to say hi to you, Atola, but since we’ve met here, I thought we could just go around town a bit.”

It was only half a lie, okay? I really *had* been planning on wandering around, so I was telling her the truth.

“In that case, how about I join you?” she asked.

“Oh, are you free?”

“Oh, yes. Lord Cliff sent over adventurers from Crimonia in order to exterminate the monsters near the tunnel, and that’s all going swimmingly. Blitz and the others have come back and agreed to head over to do that for a while, too, so there aren’t any issues at the adventurers’ guild. The trade guild...now *they’re* having a time of it. There’s a ton of stuff coming in from Crimonia, and they’ve gotten piles and piles of instructions from Milaine.”

“Seems like a lot for Jeremo to deal with.”

“Yeah, but he’s doing a good job. Even if it does seem like he occasionally tries to escape,” Atola added with a laugh. “But yeah, people are smiling again here. We missed that, Yuna.”

“Cliff and Milaine were the ones who did all that work.”

“No one believes a word of that but you,” said Atola with a bright smile. She grabbed Fina and Shuri’s hands, then, and started walking.

I could’ve argued, if I felt like it. Instead I just followed after the three of them.

Chapter 120:

The Bear Has a Four-Person Walk

GUIDED BY ATOLA, we ended up going on a field trip to the fish market. The morning catches were lined up in the market, ready and...

“Wriggling! Ohmigosh they’re *wriggling*?”

“They look so gross!”

The two were making an awful big deal about watching an octopus. “It tastes good, believe it or not.”

“No way, really?”

Yep. Octopus tasted good whether you ate it raw, grilled it, or boiled it.

“Yuna, what’s that thingy?”

“That’s a crab. They taste great boiled.”

Plus, soup flavored with crab tasted great. Shrimp too.

“Can you really eat all these things?”

“Heck yeah you can. You already did, as a matter of fact: they were in the stuff we ate yesterday that Deigha made.”

“Really?! *Whoaaaaa*.” Fina and Shuri looked at the crab...

...and slowly reached their hands toward it...

“Hey, that’s dangerous. Don’t touch it,” I warned them. I’d hate for them to get pinched.

At my words, the two of them quickly pulled their hands back.

After we took a look around the market, we headed to the clearing in town where the food carts gathered. A delicious aroma wafted toward us as we approached. Mmmm...

“That seems so yummy...”

“I wanna eat some!”

The two of them were eyeing a grilled squid stand.

“All right,” said Atola with a laugh, “I’ll buy some for you. You two eat whatever you want with this.” She tried to hand them money, but they wouldn’t take it.

“What’s wrong?”

“Um...?” The girls looked up at me. I guess they had reservations about accepting money from someone they just met, so I just pulled money out of my bear storage and handed it to the two.

“This,” I said seriously, “is for helping me dig up the bamboo shoots yesterday.”

“But you brought us with you here!”

“Maybe. But since you came all the way over, you’ve gotta eat the great food.”

Fina and Shuri looked at each other, then—as though they’d communicated with each other—they nodded slightly, looked up at me, and took the money I had in my bear puppet’s mouth.

“Yuna, thank you.”

“Thanks, Yuna!”

But there was one person who seemed to feel left out...

“Would you take my money too?” Atola asked the girls, looking a little abandoned as she stood beside us.

The sisters looked at me again, and I gave an imperial nod. With a thanks, the girls took her money, took one another’s hands like the best friends they were, and ran off to the stalls.

Atola smiled wistfully. “They’re such honest, good kids.”

“Pretty much.” They weren’t difficult. Me, on the other hand...I’d been a bit different. Atola and I sat down at a bench nearby and watched them.

“Yuna, did you hear what’s going on at the seaport?”

“Deigha and Anz told me a little.”

“Did they tell you anything about the criminals?”

I just shook my head. They hadn’t mentioned anything about that.

Atola sighed. “I suppose they wouldn’t be able to with those little girls around. Well, the former guild master of the trade guild was executed, as were all the other felons.”

“Oh, really?” I didn’t really remember what they even looked like. Huh.

“It was a public execution. Not many people came to watch—mostly just the old men and the family and friends of the people they all...took from us. I do think that the victims’ families will be able to get some closure from this, move forward and such.”

Move to Crimonia, maybe, just as Anz requested. “Come to think of it, have you decided on a mayor? Seemed like Cliff wanted you to take up the position.”

“Oh, but I can’t accept. I know myself, and I *know* that I’m too lazy for that. Too much work, thank you very much.”

“Then who’s mayor?”

“Old man Kuro’s son, believe it or not. He was reluctant, but he’s the son of a bigwig around here, so no one was going to oppose that.”

“Reluctant, huh? I thought there’d be a ton of people who would want to be mayor though.”

“Pssht. You know what happened with the previous mayor, don’t you? Everyone kept hounding the mayor, day in and day out, to do something about the kraken. When the mayor tried to stock up food from a neighboring town, the robbers appeared and *that* whole plan went nowhere. The townspeople got even madder with the guy. After seeing how rough things got with him, nobody wanted to take up the mantle. Old man Kuro pretty much forced his son to do it.”

Yikes. Thoughts and prayers to Kuro’s poor kid. “The old mayor’s not coming back then?”

“Not unless he’s willing to face the consequences for slipping out in the dead of the night, I doubt it. The townspeople would *not* be forgiving.”

“But what if he came back? Who would be mayor then?”

“Same as we got now. This seaport is now under Lord Cliff’s jurisdiction, so the old mayor wouldn’t be able to do jack. If anything does get wonky, Lord Cliff would probably help us out and calm things down.”

Seemed like Atola had her faith in Cliff. Well, I guess I could leave things up to Cliff if the ex-mayor did come back.

“Also,” Atola added, “it would probably be dangerous for the ex-mayor to come back.”

“Dangerous?”

“I said they wouldn’t be forgiving, and I meant it. There are a lot of people with grudges against him.”

Yeah. I guess any populace would hold a grudge if they were abandoned by some jerk like that, no matter the world.

“Enough about that depressing stuff—Yuna, where are you all staying? At Deigha’s? Or in the bear?”

“The...the *bear*?” Stay cool, Yuna. “Deigha’s inn was filled up, so I happen to be staying at *my house* on the outskirts of the seaport.”

“I knew it. Hm. I wonder if we’ve got to start building more inns. Once the tunnel’s done, we’ll probably have more people. At this rate, we’ll definitely run out of rooms.”

“You’re not starting to build stuff?” They finished prepping the lumber, but hadn’t started any constructions?

“We’re going to start soon, but we don’t have enough workers at the moment. Also, we still have the issues of all the monsters in the area, so we’ve had to postpone it till we can take them out.”

“Right, I saw Blitz. Is the monster extermination going all right?”

“Thanks to the adventurers, we haven’t seen hide nor hair of ’em recently, at

least nearby. Right now, I'm having them go a little further out. Then we'll actually start construction."

Personally, I'd like them to finish before the nice, warm summer came...if they had summers. They did have summers in this world, right? I put that doubt aside, opened my mouth to say something else, and Fina and Shuri came back, hand in hand and looking joyful.

"Yuna!" A nod. "Ms. Atola!"

"Welcome back, guys." They looked satisfied, so I guess they'd gotten something tasty to eat.

"Well then," said Atola, "I'm heading back to the guild. What're you all doing next?"

"Only thing I can think of is going to the trade guild, asking how things are with the Land of Wa and all that."

"Right," said Atola with a nod. "The Land of Wa. They used to come about once a month, but then...the kraken. I hope that their ship wasn't sunk."

"Ehh, I'll just be patient." Of course, if push came to shove I could ask for info at the capital. With that, we left Atola and headed to the trade guild. When we got there, the employees were completely busy with work, with not an idle employee in sight.

"M-Ms. Yuna!" One of the female employees noticed me. When she blurted that out, everyone else in the place looked at me, all at once.

Fina and Shuri stood there for a moment, shocked by the employees' gaze. I plopped my hands on their heads to calm them down.

I coughed. "Is, ah, Jeremo around?"

"Yes, one moment."

The employee called Jeremo out from a room in the back: "It's the bear girl." And a very tired Jeremo came over to us.

"Been a while," I said.

"Yes, you look like you're doing well."

“I wish I could say the same to you, Jeremo.”

“I wish I’d never agreed to become the guild master,” he said hoarsely. “Too busy. No breaks. Mountain of paperwork. Never goes down. I have so much to do, and...and then there’s the instructor from Crimonia...” he added, his voice full of dread.

“Please,” said a woman’s voice, “don’t make me sound so terrible. If you just did a proper job remembering how to do your work, there wouldn’t be any issues. The sooner you learn your job, the sooner I get to go back to Crimonia, boy.” She was an intelligent-looking woman (in her mid-twenties, maybe?) and she stood tall behind Jeremo. (I think glasses would have looked good on her.) “I’m teaching you this because Milaine asked me to. I left my husband and child in town, so *please* get your act together.”

“I got it. I’ll do my best.”

“*Please* do.”

I guess this was the instructor who Milaine said would “assist” him.

“Ms. Yuna, it’s nice to meet you,” she said. “I am Anabell, from Crimonia.”

Oh, um? “You know who I am, Anabell?”

“I’ve seen you many times around Crimonia. Really, there is not a single employee working at Crimonia’s trade guild who doesn’t know who you are. What has brought you here? Do you have a complaint for Jeremo?”

Jeremo blinked. “Why would she? I haven’t done anything, have I?”

“Do. Your. Job.”

They had this rapid-fire back-and-forth thing going, and I didn’t want to kill the vibe, so I just decided to ignore that part. “Uhh, I was wondering what happened with the Land of Wa.”

“Oh, that,” said Anabell. “It looks like a ship made contact with a Land of Wa ship the other day. The fishermen told them what happened to the seaport, so I believe we will restart trade again.”

“Really?!” Good to hear.

“Yes, but we don’t know *when* it will restart.”

But not good enough.

Anyway, this Anabell seemed pretty amazing. She had a reply ready a moment after I asked—at the very least, she was good enough for Milaine. If Jeremo learned from her, he might end up becoming a great guild master. “Is Jeremo doing a good job?”

“Hmm. He does try to skip out sometimes, but for the most part he’s putting everything he has into this. If only he wasn’t so insistently asking for breaks right away...”

“What?” Jeremo protested. “That’s because you won’t let me have any room to breathe.”

“The more you suffer while doing your work,” said Anabell, “the better it will be for the townspeople. No breaks.”

What a terrible workplace. If I didn’t get any breaks, I’d just quit. In the words of a wise man, “working is losing.” Now I understood what the old guy gang meant by their assessment of Jeremo. He wasn’t diligent, but he did the work. He was the kinda guy who wouldn’t let you down if you were relying on him.

“There’s something I’d like to ask you, Ms. Yuna,” said Anabell. “When will you be able to return to Crimonia?”

“I was thinking tomorrow.”

“I apologize for asking, but would you be kind enough to hand this report to the guild master?”

“A report?”

“We send a report and request materials every ten days, but Jeremo was late processing something and that matter wasn’t entered into the report from a few days ago. We need those items quickly, though, so we can’t just bundle them with the next report.”

“I just need to hand it off to her? Fine by me.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll bring the documents right away. I’m counting on you.”

So I accepted documents from Anabell, left the trade guild behind, and...there wasn't much to do, then. I told Anz and Deigha that I'd be going home tomorrow. The three of us ran along the beaches on my bears and, finally, headed back to the bear house to watch the sun set over the ocean.

"We're going home tomorrow?" Fina asked during our baths.

"Yeah, I don't want to make Tiermina worry too much about you."

"You think mom's worried about us?"

"Moms do that." She was so kind, I couldn't imagine her *not* worrying over her daughters. "More importantly, did you two have fun?"

"Yes, tons!"

"The fish were yummy."

The two of them were beaming. Yeah, bringing them along paid off.

"Let's all come together next time, you and your mom and everybody."

"Yes!"

"Uh-huh!"

Just as we planned, we headed out for Crimonia the next day.

Extra Story:

The Rookie Adventurer Horn,

Part One

“Horn!” Shin yelled. He was smack in the middle of fighting a wolf. I shot off a clod of hardened dirt at the wolf, and it was a hit! The monster let out a yip, collapsed, and then Shin dealt the finishing blow.

“Your magic really has gotten stronger, Horn.”

“Yeah, and all thanks to Yuna.” It really was, too. She was the one who taught me how to use magic and gave me all those pointers. I had my troubles at first, yeah, but now I could even use her lessons in the heat of battle. There were still some things I couldn’t do *exactly* like Yuna described, but I liked learning it all bit by bit.

“That bear really was something to reckon with,” said Shin.

“Yes, but Shin...you absolutely can’t say anything like that in front of Yuna.”

“Pssst. You always make her sound so scary.”

When I asked the senior adventurers about Yuna again, they told me she was pretty scary when she got mad. Add in the number of monsters Yuna had slain (according to the guild employees themselves) and you wound up with someone you never, ever wanted to make your enemy.

Sure, Yuna dressed in a cute bear costume, but she was actually an outstanding adventurer...and I also knew that Yuna was kind.

When she’d seen that the orphans were in trouble, she gave them food and work, and even rebuilt their house. The reason why eggs were so plentiful in this town was because Yuna had made that happen for the orphanage. On top of that, apparently the kids working at that bakery were *also* orphans.

She was so amazing, even though she was practically the same age as me...

“Horn, Shin,” said Lah, who was doing the butchering, “make sure you keep a

close watch on the outskirts of this location, you hear?”

I was lost in thought. “Sorry!” If we didn’t keep watch, animals or other monsters could come by while Lah worked.

We’d come from a village near Crimonia to become adventurers. The four of us had known each other since we were kids: Shin was the one with the sword, and he more or less acted as our leader. Then there was Lah—short for Lahtte—the hunter’s son who knew his way around a bow and arrow. Just a few days ago, he learned how to handle his bow even better from a guy, Brandaugh, in a nearby village. He was ecstatic about it. The third person, the strongest of us all, was Bru—so of course, we called him Brute. His weapon was an axe.

And last came me, a mage who could only use a smidge of weak magic...but thanks to Yuna, I was stronger. These days, I wasn’t dragging everyone else down.

We grumbled about supplies as Lah harvested:

“I hope we can get our hands on a big item bag soon too.”

“I’d like one that can at least fit a wolf.”

If we had an item bag, that’d make our job much easier...but we had a lot of work to go before we could get one. With an item bag, we could slay a monster and do the harvest in a safe spot. No more throwing out the parts we couldn’t take home anymore.

I hoped we could get an item bag soon.

After we finished the day’s work and headed back to report at the adventurers’ guild, I noticed a crowd gathered around the quest notice board.

“Helen, did something happen?” I asked her in the middle of reporting our wolf slaying.

“You mean on the board? Yes; Lord Cliff himself put in a quest.”

“The feudal lord?!” Shin gasped.

“Was a strong monster spotted then?” asked Lah.

A quest from the lord himself? Maybe some great and terrible monster had risen to terrorize the land...

“No,” said Helen, “it’s just normal monster slaying work.”

“Normal work?” It was almost disappointing.

Helen nodded. “All of you have been saving up because you want an item bag, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“In that case, why don’t you try participating in the quest? The reward is a little higher than usual. I think you could handle it now.”

If the pay was that high, we almost had to accept. I wanted to hear more details from Helen, but there were other adventurers waiting their turn, so instead I looked at the board. There were fewer people in the crowd compared to earlier, so I could see the quest details.

“Um, slaying of monsters by the Bear Tunnel?” Bear...Tunnel? What on earth?

There was also a map on the quest paper. It was a little far on foot, but they were provisioning a carriage for any adventurers. On top of that, they had people who’d buy monster parts near this Bear Tunnel, so we didn’t need to bring the monsters back with us. And, just as Helen said, the selling prices for monster parts were higher than usual.

“Shin,” I said, “what do you wanna do?”

“Quests as good as this never come up.”

True, but...the only monsters noted to appear in that area near the Bear Tunnel were wolves, horned hares, goblins, and... “There are orcs, though. At our current level...”

“At our current level, we should be fine. If we see one, we’ll just take off.”

“Yeah,” added Bru, “we’ll just take out the wolves and horned hares.”

We talked it through and had our plan: we’d accept the slaying quest and leave the orcs to more senior adventurers. With that, we headed over to Helen to seal the deal—the adventurers who were behind us in line were heading to

the quest board. I guess she told them the same thing she told us.

“Helen,” I asked, “what’s the Bear Tunnel?”

“It’s a tunnel through the Elezent mountain range.” According to Helen, the tunnel had only recently been discovered. The quest’s goal was to slay the monsters in the area so they could make use of it.

“What’s on the other side?” I asked.

“Apparently,” said Helen, “the *ocean*.”

“The *ocean*!” I repeated.

“I want to see that ocean!” said Shin.

“Sorry. There *had* been a quest to slay monsters on the other side, but there were so many offers that it had to be closed.”

“Aww.” Shin groaned.

“I’d like to go too,” said Helen. “Please, just be patient. Now tell me, if you would: are you taking the quest?”

Of course we were.

“Well then,” said Helen, “we will be preparing carriages tomorrow morning. Please don’t be late.”

The adventurers’ guild was as crowded as I’ve seen it the next day.

“Won’t we end up competing for monsters?” Shin groaned.

“Shin,” I said, “weren’t you listening? There’s the monsters in the tunnel *and* monsters on the other side. We’re not all going to the same place.”

“C’mon, Horn, I know that much.”

“Anyway, let’s hurry up now. We can’t miss our carriage.”

We found Helen near those carriages, giving out instructions.

“Good morning,” I said with a nod.

“Ah, I’m so glad you came on time.”

“Mmhm. But there sure are a lot more people than I thought there’d be.”

“With such a large quest reward, are you really so surprised?” asked Helen.

Shin shook his head. “We’ve sure got to put the elbow grease into this.”

“So— Shin’s group, please ride on that carriage. The carriages go to different places, so please make sure you don’t take a different one. If you accidentally take the wrong one, you might end up being taken to a place where there are orcs.”

Shin swallowed. “Ah...”

“Shin,” said Helen, “make sure you don’t make a mistake like that, understand?”

“I won’t.” We piled into the carriage Helen told us to and found several adventurers already riding in it.

“Sure is nice having a carriage take us where we need to go,” I said.

Shin nodded. “And on top of that, we don’t need to carry the monsters we slay back to the town.”

“We’ve gotta work hard to earn that dough,” said Lah.

“Right on,” Bru grunted.

After being rocked around in the carriage for a few hours, we finally arrived at the edge of the woods. Apparently, we were hoofing it from here on out.

“Where are we going first?” Lah asked.

“I was thinking,” said Shin, “we might as well take a look at this infamous tunnel.”

“Same here,” I said. A lot of us adventurers were curious, actually. We all followed signs leading up to the tunnel until, after walking for a while, a *bear* appeared in front of us, of all things! A bear statue, to be exact. The adorable little guy held a sword!

“Do you feel like this bear looks familiar?” I said. I’d definitely seen it before. In fact, I knew exactly where I’d seen it...

“This is the same bear as the one in front of Yuna’s shop, ain’t it?” said Shin.

Lah frowned. “Why would there be a bear statue all the way over here?”

The bear at the shop carried bread, but this one held a sword.

“Well,” said Shin, “the only thing I can think of is that the tunnel has something to do with Yuna.” I mean, it was even called the Bear Tunnel. I agreed with Shin, of course.

The bear statue drew my curiosity, but the tunnel did too. Somewhere beyond the blackness of this tunnel, the ocean spread out so vast that I couldn’t even imagine it. Maybe I could see it when we finished the quest. I mean, I had to see it at least once. “Shin, let’s go to the ocean once this tunnel is finished.”

“Right on. That’d be nice.”

Bru nodded. “Uh-huh.”

But before we could vacation, we needed to save up. It was time to slay some monsters.

“Shin, it went over that way.”

“Right, leave it to me. Horn, I’m going to stop it.”

“Okay, gotcha.” I forged a hardened clump of dirt with earth magic. Throw the dirt, hit the wolf, it yips and falls, and then Shin dealt the finishing blow—we had a pattern, and the slaying was going well.

“Monster extermination sure is easier now that you’ve got stronger magic, Horn,” said Shin.

Next step was monster cleanup: if we left the monster corpse around, other monsters would come by, so cleaning up afterward was just good manners. We weren’t about to make enemies of our fellow adventurers, you know? We’d just harvest them and bury or burn anything we didn’t need.

“That’s thanks to Yuna, too,” I said. “I feel like I’m really getting the hang of using mana.” If I could collect mana, I’d be able to use strong magic, but I also wouldn’t be able to use it multiple times. I needed to calculate my uses of large

or small bursts of magic—*that* was the role of a mage who ran support from the back, Yuna said.

Then, depending on how I worked with the others, I needed to figure out whether I even *could* give them support. Backing out was always an option. Attempting something impossible was dangerous, maybe even fatal. Getting to know my mana levels was the first step for so much of this.

We'd been slaying wolves and horned hares for a while now near the tunnel entrance. "At this rate," I mused out loud, "we might be able to buy an item bag. We should really be grateful to the lord." Honestly, I hadn't thought it would go this well.

"Especially since he's buying parts at higher prices than normal," said Shin. And on top of that, those sellers were so close that carrying things was a cinch. Everything was so efficient on this quest.

"We're going to run out of nearby monsters soon," Lah pointed out. Everything moved so quickly—just yesterday, they started cutting down the trees in order to make a path all the way to the tunnel.

"Plus," I said, "there are other adventurers around."

"Hmm. In that case, let's head that way—" he pointed out at some nearby trees. "I heard from other adventurers that we've still got more monsters that way."

We listened to Shin and headed on over.

In the middle of our walk through the forest, Shin stopped dead. Put his pointer finger up to his lips. We stopped talking and went silent.

Just ahead, right where Shin gestured, was an orc.

"What should we do?" Shin whispered.

"There's no way we can handle that," I said.

"But we'll be able to get more money than other monsters if we can," said

Shin.

“We should do it,” said Bru.

“But we decided we wouldn’t attempt orcs,” said Lah.

“Shin...” I hissed.

Shin sighed. “Yeah, you’re right...”

The discussion was over, and we were just about to leave, when...

Snap.

Someone stepped on a branch.

That moment, the orc roared and swung its giant club. *Crack*—it hit a tree near us.

“Run!”

We sprinted away, but the orc had already noticed us, and it wasn’t planning on letting us go. What was it that Yuna had told me? Um, uh...

You can...you can use earth magic to protect yourself from attacks!

I summoned up some earth magic, shaped it, and summoned crossed stone poles between the trees. I couldn’t make a giant wall like Yuna could, so she’d thought this up instead. If I could block off the space between trees with things similar to cords, I could stop the enemy...but I needed to make them strong enough to do that.

And there it was. The orc was hampered by the crossed earth. I’d done it after all.

“We’ve got to run right now,” I gasped out.

The orc bellowed and brought down its club. The earth wall barrier shattered.

I made more to block the orc’s path. I could keep it at bay a little, but this was bad. I might’ve used too much mana. Fatigue gripped me.

“Horn, you all right?!”

“Uh-huh.” Tired. Had to run anyway. Shin pulled my arm.

The orc stopped, lifted its club and *crack*—broke the crossed barrier.

“Damn,” Shin snarled, “we’ve gotta fight here.”

At that, Lah got his bow ready and fired...and the orc knocked the arrow clean out of the air.

“No way,” I whispered. How could it *do* that?

Shin readied his sword, and Bru his axe.

“Horn, you run,” said Shin. “We’ll buy you time.”

“But you all...”

Lah let an arrow fly while Shin and Bru swung away with their weapons. The orc blocked every single attack with his huge club—we were on the defensive now. The orc swung at Shin, he blocked, and just *blocking* it sent him flying. Bru swung up his axe, but the orc thrust its club and sent him hurtling away too.

“Shin! Bru!” I cried.

The orc hollered, looked at Lah and I...and rushed toward us.

Extra Story:

The Rookie Adventurer Horn,

Part Two

THE ORC RUSHED US in a vicious assault.

Lah fired an arrow. It embedded itself in the orc's arm, but no—it wasn't enough to stop the orc. I used the last dregs of my mana and hit the orc's head with a hardened clod of dirt, and...and the orc stopped moving.

Okay. We had something now.

Lah fired another arrow and hit the orc, but it didn't collapse. I collected my last bit of mana in my hand. I made it harder, made it spin faster—made it *stronger*, and let the hardened earth magic fly!

...and the clod hit the orc in its left arm. I aimed for its body, but I missed. The orc unleashed a war cry, though, and it looked like it was in agony. It tried to lift its left arm, but the flesh hung limp from its shoulder.

Now it raised its right arm, though—its club arm—and now we were really in trouble. We tried to make a break for it, and the orc brought down its right arm. I mean, it *really* brought down its right arm, because the arm itself fell off the orc and slapped the ground, followed shortly by its head.

"Gil," said a voice, "why're you stealing the best part?"

"Didn't mean it like that," said another.

A woman with beautiful golden hair and a sturdy-looking guy appeared from the trees. I'd seen both of them around the adventurers' guild. Rulina and Gil were their names, if I remembered right.

"You all right?" asked Rulina. "Or did we steal your catch?"

"No," I panted, "you saved us."

"Glad we did. We were a little far, but it looked like you were under attack. The orc had its back turned to us, so we took our chances and attacked."

I looked around, trying to take in the whole situation now that everything

settled down. It looked like the orc's head was cut off by Gil, and in a single swing too. "Shin, Bru, are you okay?!" I called, looking over to where they'd been sent flying.

"I'm over here," Shin groaned. The pair of them came over, clutching their bodies.

"Are you two all right?"

I wanted to run to them, even tried to, but I used up so much magic that I could barely walk. Shin ran over right when I was about to collapse and broke my fall. "Hey, Horn. You all right?"

"Just used a little too much mana, but I'm fine. You two?"

"Yeah, I'm good," said Shin. "Got bopped around a little, that's all."

Bru was fine too, turned out. What a relief; they hadn't been badly injured.

"You saved us," I said, turning to Rulina and Gil. "Thank you so much." All four of us thanked them. It was hard to stop.

"It's fine," said Rulina, shaking her head. "We just attacked because the orc left its back unguarded. You're rookie adventurers, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Horn."

"Shin's the name."

"Call me Lahtte."

"Brute."

"I'm Rulina. Tall, dark, and silent over there is Gil."

"Yes, we know you! Everyone says you're great adventurers."

"Do they?" Rulina blinked, looking a little embarrassed. "Well, ah, orcs have been spotted around here, so it's dangerous."

"Really? We heard there were just wolves in this area."

"Wolves, too, but not *just* wolves. If you can't take down an orc, it's dangerous around here."

An orc. As in, one orc, and all four of us hadn't been enough to defeat it. I

needed to practice my magic more. I needed to get stronger. If I'd just been able to hit it somewhere other than its arm with my last bit of magic, I might've been able to defeat it, but no...I'd gotten flustered and missed. Lah told me it was the same for him—we both choked up.

I needed to work harder.

From there, we headed back to the temporary shed that the guild employees set up, Rulina and Gil accompanying us. They built the shed near the tunnel, and with the massive crowd of other adventurers there, it was completely safe.

As if waiting for us by the tunnel entrance, there was that cute bear with the sword to welcome us back.

Rulina tried to stifle a laugh. "Ah, when I see that statue, I can't help but smile."

It really was super cute... "Um, do you think this statue has anything to do with Yuna?"

Rulina raised an eyebrow. "You know about Yuna, Horn?"

"Yes, she's my teacher."

"Your *teacher*?"

"She teaches me magic. Like, how to use it and stuff. That's how I make sure I don't drag everyone else down."

Shin shook his head. "Drag us down? Horn, you're our essential firepower right now."

Bru agreed. "If we hadn't had your magic, that orc would've gotten us."

It was nice of them to say, but I was still a long way away. I really had become more confident thanks to Yuna, but no way was I going to stop now. I knew I could work harder. I *knew* I could be more useful to everyone.

"I see," said Rulina. "Yuna really is your teacher, then."

"Yes. See why I was curious about this bear statue?"

"I do. Now," said Rulina, "this is just a rumor, all right? But apparently, it's

called the Bear Tunnel because Yuna found it. Hence the bear statue.”

Yuna had found it? Simply amazing!

We handed off our harvested materials to the adventurers’ guild and received our payment. Our kill count climbed, too. At this rate, if we put together all the money we’d gathered until now, we might even be able to buy a slightly large item bag...

“How long are you sticking around, Horn?” asked Rulina.

“We need to consider how much food we have, so we’re going home the day after tomorrow.”

“Same as us then,” said Rulina.

“It’s only you and Gil in that party?”

“These days, yeah. We used to have a four-person party, but we split. Just the two of us for now.”

A little ways away, Gil chatted with Shin and Bru.

“Gil,” said Shin, “could I hold that sword?”

“Mhm.”

Shin took the large sword from Gil. “It’s heavy...”

“Shin,” said Brute with a snort, “you’re gonna make yourself look bad.”

“But I’m telling you it’s heavy. You try holding it, Brute.” Shin handed the sword off to Bru. Bru held it, but even he seemed to have trouble with its weight despite being the strongest out of all of us...

“It’s lighter than I thought,” said Brute, as if his face wasn’t scrunched up with effort.

“No way,” said Shin with a laugh, “you’re gonna drop that thing on your foot!”

Everyone looked like they were having fun. When they returned the sword to Gil, he waved it around like it was nothing. Shin and Bru piled praise on him. If Gil cared one way or the other, he sure wasn’t showing it.

“Looks like Gil’s pretty happy too,” said Rulina.

“Huh? Is he?”

Rulina tilted her head. “Nah. I think he’s happy.”

I looked at Gil’s face. Nope, I couldn’t tell a thing from it.

“What are we doing tomorrow?” Shin asked, which meant now we had to finally decide.

“There are orcs over there,” I said, gesturing in that direction, “so we can’t go *there*.”

“But there aren’t any monsters nearby,” said Shin, “so we’ve still got to go a little further out.”

Rulina broke into the conversation: “Then how about you all come with us?”

“Rulina?” I could hardly believe it.

“We’ll take care of the orcs. You just fight the wolves and goblins.”

“Are you sure?”

“But that would make more work for you,” said Shin.

“It’s fine. We’ve already made more than enough, and teaching rookies is part of what a senior adventurer does. You agree, right Gil?”

“Sure,” said Gil, stony-faced as ever. Wait, was Gil angry at Rulina for deciding everything for him?

“Um, Rulina,” I whispered, “are you sure Gil’s okay with this?”

“Huh? How so? You think he’s mad or something?”

Gil looked at me expressionlessly. Yep, this guy was definitely mad.

“Look at that face,” said Rulina, “can’t you see? He’s not angry in the slightest.”

I-I couldn’t see that at all, no!

The next day, we headed back to where the orcs were. It was a little scary, but at least we had Rulina and Gil on our side.

“Okay, juniors,” said Rulina, “we’ll stay behind you. Just go about business as usual. If an orc appears, we’ll take care of it.”

“All right,” Shin answered, and the rest of us nodded. I nervously crept forward. Shin, Lah, and I guarded the front and Bru took the back.

I could hear Rulina and Gil talking behind us.

“Looks like they’re putting thought into this.”

“Yup.”

And they were watching us too? It made me even more nervous than usual.

Shin indicated for us to stop right where he was walking up ahead. I peeked through a gap, and there: two wolves. We exchanged positions. Shin and Bru went ahead. Lah and I prepped for long-range attacks, figured out who would take what wolf. Lah loosed his arrow and I launched my earth magic, they hit, and Shin and Bru jumped out simultaneously.

One of the wolves—the one that Lah stuck with an arrow in its belly—tried to run off, but Shin thrust his sword and dealt the final blow. Bru finished off the wolf I hit with my earth clump.

“Oh, you defeated those things a lot more smoothly than expected,” said Rulina.

“Sure did,” said Gil.

Thanks? The praise was a little embarrassing, though...

“You really have your teamwork down,” Rulina added.

“We’re weak,” I said, “so we need to fight while helping each other out. That’s how we win.”

“Knowing you can trust your teammates is a good thing.”

We’d all gotten along since childhood, so we had trust in spades. From there, we kept defeating wolves and horned hares. Two orcs did appear and gave us a fright, but Rulina and Gil defeated them in the blink of an eye.

Shin whistled. “That’s amazing!”

“Rulina, you’re so cool,” I said.

“Thanks, but your teacher is a lot more amazing than me.”

“You mean Yuna?”

“I sure do. She’s something else in a fight, let me tell you.”

“Have you seen her fight before, Rulina?”

Gil snorted. “And got carried around like a princess.”

“Gil!” Rulina snapped.

“Like a...princess?” I repeated.

“What’s that about?” asked Shin.

“I-It’s nothing. Never ask anyone else about that—ever.”

“I-I don’t really understand,” I said, “but we, uh...we understand?” The four of us nodded, prompted by Rulina’s...enthusiasm. No more questions about that, got it.

“Gil,” Rulina groaned, “stop smirking!”

I looked at Gil just in case, but...could you call that a smile? Could you call that an *anything*?

With our last day of adventuring done, we headed back to the tunnel where the bear waited.

“Gil, we’re ready.” Shin and Bru were already trying to take on Gil and his sword.

They’d gotten the short end of the stick compared to Lah and me. Brandaugh taught Lah how to use a bow, and Yuna taught me how to use magic, which apparently made them jealous. That was why they asked Gil to teach them how to fight.

Rulina cackled. “Gil looks like he’s having an all right time.”

Shin swung his sword, and Gil mowed him down with the flat end of his

massive sword.

“Gil,” said Shin, “how do we get strong?”

“Get swole. Build stamina. Swordsmen have gotta move the most out of anyone.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Don’t take your eyes off the enemy. Learn techniques through experience.”

“But what if we still can’t win even if we do?”

“Then fight with your partners. You got teammates. Trust them.”

At those words, Shin looked at us. “You mean we can’t get stronger on our own?”

“People’ve got their limits. Only a few become truly strong, but when you fight with your friends? Then you can almost get as strong as those few.”

Rulina beamed. “Awful talkative today, isn’t he? Maybe he’s taken a liking to them.”

“Rulina,” I said, “do you really think that people have their limits to how strong they can get?”

“Sure. People aren’t created equal, not really. Mana is a good example of that. Even we have different amounts of mana between us, Horn, and the difference between us and Yuna is immeasurable.”

“Is Yuna really that strong?”

“She is. She was fantastic when she beat the goblin king. Trapped it in a hole and defeated it by hurling magic at it. Going out to take on a black viper solo is also unbelievable, but she went out and killed that thing like it was nothing.”

Yuna...she really *was* amazing. “But she really doesn’t look strong.” She looked super cute, like a big fuzzy bear. “But just remembering what happened to Shin when we first met is terrifying.”

“What happened?”

I told her what happened during our first meeting.

“Horn, don’t talk about that,” said Shin. “No one thinks a girl in a cute bear outfit could be that strong, okay?” At some point, they finished their sword practice and started to listen in on our conversation.

“Shin,” said Rulina with a grimace, “you took a terrifying risk there. You’ve got to value your life more.”

“Terrifying?” Shin repeated. “Really, Rulina?”

“Yuna is terrifying when she’s angry,” Gil agreed.

“You too, Gil?”

“Him too. Our old teammates picked a fight with Yuna and got pummeled. Gil’s face was puffy for weeks,” said Rulina. She smiled, but it sounded like a nightmare.

Just hearing about it made Shin tense up too. Oh no, he’d gotten really close to being pummeled. I’m glad he was okay, but...wow.

Then, the next day, we got on the same carriage we’d boarded out to go back to Crimonia, with Rulina and Gil traveling with us. We took several days off to recover and now, finally, we were going out to shop.

Finally—*finally*—we had that item bag.

“Now we’ll be able to carry the monsters we’ve slain.”

“Yeah, our goal now is to get item bags that are this big for all of us.”

“We’ve got to work hard.”

“Right!”

Since we met Yuna, it felt like everything was going swimmingly. So many things had been so difficult till then...we’d pinched pennies and struggled to buy supplies at all.

Scary or not, maybe Yuna was my good luck bear?

Extra Story: Fina's Mileela Trip

THE FIRST DAY.

While I counted the kokekko eggs with my mom and Shuri, Yuna came by. I wondered what she wanted, and then—out of nowhere!—she asked for permission from my mom to borrow me...and my mom said yes!

To “borrow” me? What, do Yuna and my mom think I’m just a thing?

When I asked why she needed me, she said she wanted me to go with her to Mileela. She must’ve remembered when I said I wanted to see the ocean. That made me happy. I wish she’d said that from the beginning, if that was what she wanted.

But...I had work, didn’t I? I wasn’t so sure, but Mom gave me a push. With Mom’s permission, I was going to go to the ocean.

“All right! Time to borrow your little girl, then.”

Mom laughed. “You can take her anytime.”

They were really toying around with me. Ugh, it made me so embarrassed! My little sister Shuri looked like she was jealous of me, though... she wanted to come with us. Shuri said so, and then guess what?

Yuna invited her, too, and now Shuri was coming with us! Yuna’s so nice.

We got on Kumayuru right away and headed out. Shuri made a real scene on top of Kumayuru. I understood why she was having so much fun, but it wasn’t nice for Kumayuru, so I told her to please calm down.

Kumayuru ran on the road really fast. Next, we ran through the path in the forest. There were so many people working there. Shuri gave them a big wave from on top of Kumayuru. They waved their hands back. It was nice to see!

When we got through the forest on the path, a really big bear statue was there to welcome us.

A bear? But...why? It was the same bear as the one in front of Yuna's shop.

I asked Yuna about it, but she didn't seem to want to talk about it. I didn't mention it again, but come on...it was definitely connected to Yuna, wasn't it?

The inside of the tunnel was bright from mana gems.

Whoa, this was the tunnel? Kumayuru and Kumakyu ran through it. We saw the same stuff for what felt like forever. That sure made me nervous, but after a while we found people in the tunnel. Apparently they were setting up mana gems. Seeing them made me feel a little relieved.

There weren't any light mana gems after that, though. It was pitch black. Yuna's light magic had to brighten up the tunnel, and the magic light was shaped like a bear head! It was super cute.

Once we got out of the tunnel, there was a really big pool of water that stretched out as far as I could see. It was really the ocean. Whoa...it was a whole lot bigger than anyone had told me. All water, on and on and on. Shuri opened her eyes wide, too, when she saw it, but no way we could open our eyes wide enough for all that water.

I never imagined I would see something like this, never ever...

Yuna asked us if we wanted to try going up to the ocean. Shuri and I nodded and smiled. As if we'd say no! The ocean water was real cold, and salty too. It was real-life saltwater. It made my throat hurt, so Yuna brought out regular water for us.

Whew, that really helped. Yuna laughed when she saw us like that. (That was kinda mean, Yuna!)

Then we headed to the seaport.

(We saw a bear partway there. We saw a really big bear. Apparently that was Yuna's house, but why was it so big?)

When we got to the seaport, everyone talked to Yuna. She was real popular. Then she introduced us to a really muscly man at the inn named Deigha. He was almost as big as Ralock from the adventurers' guild. And oh, apparently, he was real amazing at cooking!

Then Yuna told us why she came to the seaport. She wanted to dig up these thingies called bamboo shoots. Since it would be super lonely digging them up by herself, she had invited us. Huh? I thought she invited us to see the ocean!

But then again, we *did* get to see the ocean, so I decided to help Yuna...even if I didn't know what these bamboo shoots were supposed to be.

Deigha seemed interested, too, so he was coming along with us to dig them up.

After we ate his food, we went to the bear house. It was big. I mean, it was *real* big. There were two bears! She made it so she could bring the orphans here, she said, but still. Real crazy big.

When we went inside, there was a giant dining hall. The second floor was a huge room too. Everyone would be sleeping here if they came over, she said. We went up to the third floor, where we would be sleeping. As for the fourth floor, it had the biggest bath I ever saw. It was split into boys and girls, of course.

It was a little early to take a bath, but we had to get up early tomorrow so we were going to take one and then sleep. We got naked right away and went into the bath, but there wasn't any hot water in the bathtub. It was empty! Yuna had just come back home here, so I guess it made sense. Anyways, we washed our hair and ourselves while the hot water built up.

I washed up my sister and then cleaned myself. With that done, I tried to wash Yuna's hair. Yuna's hair is really long and shiny. She's thin and her arms are all dainty and she's pretty! Where did her thin arms get the power to beat

up monsters from? Maybe it really was magic? But then again, she would also punch adventurers with her arms, too.

I helped Yuna wash her hair, but I kept wondering about it.

The second day.

The next day, in order to dig up this food called bamboo shoots, we headed out early in the morning. We slept early, so I wasn't tired at all! When we got to the entrance of the seaport, Deigha waited for us. He had a hoe on his shoulder and was ready to go.

We got to the bamboo grove Yuna told us about. Were these bamboo?

They were like thin, green tubes. They made a hard noise when we hit them a little. No way we could eat these! Deigha seemed to think the same thing since he asked Yuna about it. But then Yuna dug the ground with magic and brought something up.

Apparently, it was *gonna* be a green tube when it grew up, but it wasn't a tube yet. When I touched it, it was soft. This was a bamboo shoot and she said it tasted good. Yuna knows so many things!

But when it came to digging, Shuri and I had nothing to dig with. It was okay, though, because Yuna held up her bear puppets in front of her and Kumayuru and Kumakyu came out. I was going to dig with Kumayuru and Shuri would be with Kumakyu.

"Kumayuru, I'm counting on you!"

"Cwoom."

We all went different ways and I worked with Kumayuru.

I went a little far away. Maybe this would work?

"Kumayuru, do you know what to do?"

"Cwoom." Kumayuru crooned and dug the ground. Then, before I knew it, there was a hole and one of those things Yuna showed us was in it! Kumayuru let me do the last part, where I pulled the bamboo shoot from the hole. It was

kind of hard to do, but I did it all right! It was weird thinking we could eat this, but I looked forward to seeing how it tasted.

I carried the bamboo shoot and headed back. One was done.

“Yuna, is this okay?” I checked in with Yuna while she was digging with magic.

“Yep. Do your best to get lots. I want to make them for the orphans to eat.”

“Okay, I’ll work hard.” I went back and got to work. Kumayuru would find the shoot and dig them up, and I would pull them out at the end and take them back.

When I was in the middle of carrying them, I ran into Shuri. “You’re so fast, sis!”

I won when it came to how many shoots I brought in, but we never saw Deigha.

When I asked Yuna about that, she said she hadn’t seen him either. I guess that it really *was* hard to dig them up without Kumayuru and Kumakyu.

After that, we gathered lots of bamboo shoots and Yuna told us we were done. Shuri seemed sad that she lost to me, but I couldn’t let my little sister beat me. Shuri worked hard, though, so I made sure to be a good sister and say nice things about her.

Yuna went out to find Deigha since we hadn’t seen him, not even once. She came back right away, but Deigha only had one bamboo shoot. It looked like he couldn’t find any. Kumayuru was amazing for finding them so easily and digging them up for me.

When we got back to Deigha’s inn, Yuna started cooking right away. I tried to help, but she told me, “You’ve gotta be tired from working since morning, right? Take a load off, guys.” Shuri and I sat down on the chairs to rest.

After a while, Yuna lined the table with the bamboo shoot dishes she made. All of them looked good. When I saw the food, my stomach growled a little since I hadn’t eaten any breakfast...but nobody heard it, which was good. That

would've been real embarrassing.

Shuri and I started eating. Shuri was starving, so she stuffed her cheeks full as she ate. Of course, I ate too. It was super delicious. Yuna was amazing for being able to make a meal that even Deigha, the big muscley cook, didn't know about.

Then, since Shuri and I wanted to, we went to see the ships.

They call the place where boats line up together a "port." There were lots of different ships floating in the port. They got on them and went to catch fish in the big wide ocean. Shuri looked like she wanted to ride a ship. I did too, but we couldn't be selfish and say that.

While we were looking at the ships, Shuri found a big one and ran toward it.

"Shuri, wait!"

It was dangerous to run off, so I went after her.

When I caught her and calmed her down, people came out from behind the shadow of a boat. When they saw Yuna, they started talking to her. Did they know her? They did, and their names were Damon and Yuula.

Then (I can't believe it!) Damon said he would let us ride his ship.

The ship moved on top of the water. First it went real slow and then it gradually built up speed. Shuri made a big deal about it. Yuna yelled at us not to fall out.

The ship went further and further away from shore. The cold wind blew on us. It was scary, but it was fun too. I think I probably wasn't scared because Yuna was beside me. When Yuna's there, I feel real peaceful.

Ever since I met Yuna, the scenery I saw changed a lot. She took me to the capital. This time she took me to the ocean. If I hadn't met Yuna, I never would have seen this scenery.

Yuna...thank you.

The third day.

Once we got to the seaport, a pretty woman was sort of glaring at Yuna. She called out to her.

She was the guild master of this seaport's adventurers' guild, and her name was Atola. Yuna had helped out the seaport before, so she was kinda mad that Yuna didn't come see her. That wasn't good of Yuna. You really had to say hello to the people who helped you out.

At first Atola seemed mad, and I was worried she was scary, but then I talked to her, and guess what? She was nice! We talked about Yuna, and we even had a lot in common. Yuna saves a whole lot of people who are in trouble, doesn't she? She's so nice!

After that, we stuck with Atola. We went over to the market where they had all the fish they caught in the ocean. There were tons of fish I'd never seen before there. They were completely different shapes and sizes compared to the fish that swam in rivers.

There was also something that wriggled, but not like the fish. It looked a little gross, like it had a bunch of fins or arms. Could you really eat this? Yuna said that it was very yummy, but I think you'd need to be brave to eat something so slimy and wriggly.

The next place we went after the market was a place with shops, lined with food stalls. There were lots of different delicious smells coming from the food stands. When Shuri and I looked like we wanted to eat some, Atola and Yuna gave us money. Atola said it was a thank you for digging up the bamboo shoots.

"Yuna, thank you." I thanked Atola, too. Then, I grabbed Shuri's hand and we headed to the food stalls.

"Sis, let's eat this one." It said grilled squid on the sign. It smelled good! I bought one and Shuri and I split it. (We used to split small bits of food a lot in the past too.) It was a little tough, but it was good.

Since Shuri's mouth got dirty from eating the squid, I used my handkerchief to clean her off.

Next up, we ate things with grilled fish and roasted vegetables. Shuri wanted to eat lots of things, but we couldn't fit that much into our stomachs. The last thing we bought was seafood, and we had to try hard to finish it up.

I was stuffed. I couldn't fit anything else in. Shuri wanted to eat more and more, so I just bought everything!

But then again, everything had been really good!

After that, we went back to Yuna, went to the trade guild, talked to people, and decided to go home tomorrow.

It was a very fun three days.

I do hope we come here again!

Afterword

THANK YOU for picking up *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear*'s fifth volume. I couldn't be happier that we've gotten this far.

I wrote this volume between July and August, right in the middle of the hottest season. Naturally, my AC was on full blast while I wrote. I'm not sure if it was because of the heat, but my computer froze several times. I yelled whenever it happened, but I was always careful to save my file, which saved *me* from being dealt a mortal blow.

Continuing on from the fourth volume, this story is about what happens to Mileela after Yuna slays the kraken. Cliff and Milaine really have their hands busy making the tunnel usable. While those two are working themselves to the bone, Yuna is eating pancakes slathered with tons of honey...and when you think honey, you think bears. The title of this book is *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear*, but this is the first time we've seen actual bears.

We generally think of bears as dangerous creatures. You'll even hear stories of bears attacking people on the news, but (as you can guess from the series title) the people of this world treat bears kindly. It might be difficult to coexist with bears in reality, but I think it's fine to have humans living around bears in a story. I'd like Yuna and the bears to be happy.

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who helped publish this book.

Thank you, 029, for always drawing illustrations that are even more astounding than I expect. Yuna and Kumakyu forming a pure white pair on the cover is adorable. Thank you for hearing out all of my requests.

I'm so sorry for causing my editor trouble with so many proofreading errors and corrections. Thank you to the many, many others who were also involved in this book's production and publication. I'm grateful, too, for the readers who have followed along thus far.

I hope we can meet again in the sixth volume this coming March.



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